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THE HEADLESS HORSEMEN

CHAPTER I

FOUND IN THE MARSH

"JACK BULARD! Jack Bulard; d'ye hear me? Come here, I tell ye!"

"What's wantin', Peggy?" came in slow accents from within.

Mrs. Bulard, a buxom little woman of five-and-twenty years, looked up from her wash-tub beside the cabin door, with a savage frown.

"Ye'd better git a-comin', Jack, now, I tell ye, or I'll come in there, and club the mop-stick over your thick skull, see'f I don't. I want ye!"

"Yas, ye're allus wantin' me, Peggy, w'en I git sot down for a comfortable smoke," growled a great strapping fellow, of some ten years the woman's senior, as he lumbered along toward the door, pipe in hand. "W'ats the rumpus, gal?"

Peggy stopped in her work, and faced her spouse, excitedly.

"Ye remember that clatter of hoofs we heerd at midnight, last night, don' ye, Jack?"

"Consarn me, ef I don't! I tho't that the Demon Buffalo, w'at ther fellers ar' tellin' such almitey yarns about, war broke his tether-strings!"

"Yes!" snapped Peggy, maliciously, "an' ye war scar't nigh about inter fits!"

"No sich a thing," growled Jack. "But w'at of the clatter of hoofs?"

"A good deal, I s'pect," nodded Peggy, knowingly. "Thar's som'thin' wrong, Jack—Listen! d'ye hear *that*?"

Jack bent his mulish-looking ears forward, and was silent.

Presently a peculiar sound greeted his hearing.

It was a piteous moan or cry, such as could be emitted by only a baby, in distress.

"Humph!" muttered the squatter, "a painter's screech, I jedge."

"No, it 'tain't nuther, I tell ye!" vociferated Peggy. "It ar' a *baby's* cry!"

At this instant the long, peculiar cry greeted their hearing again.

"Whar's it cum from?" muttered Jack, listening intently. "Frum the bog over yander, eh, gal?"

"On course," coincided Peggy. "Jes' ye go over an' see, Jack. Ef it's a baby, mind you, bring the little toosty-boosty to my arms; the poor humless little cherub!"

"Ya-s! I'll toosty-boosty it," drawled he, as he turned into the cabin for his rifle. "Like's not I'll heave it over inter 'Soury, ef it's a baby."

"Now, jes' le'me see ye try it, Jack Bulard! Ef ye want me ter wear this hickory mop-stick out over your he'd, go and chuck et inter the Missessuri. There'll be one less Injin-fighter, I tell ye!"

Across the prairie from Bulard's cabin, at the distance of a couple of hundred yards, was an immense flag-bog or marsh, which ran back to the edge of the Missouri river.

At this the spring season of the year, it was generally about half-filled with water and driftwood, and there were treacherous sinks and sloughs, here and there, that made it very dangerous to cross, if not quite inaccessible.

Jack Bulard had been reared from infancy on the border, and was as good a scout, trailer, and Indian-fighter, as the district boasted of.

Therefore, when he left the cabin behind him, he did not strike out boldly in the direction whence came the frequent cries, but turned abruptly to the north and hurried off.

He was ever alert to the tricks and snares instigated by the wily savages.

So he approached by a circuitous route, and with the greatest caution.

Fully fifteen minutes had elapsed, so carefully did he sneak along, ere he disappeared in the wilderness of flags.

Once in among the rustling brakes and flags, Jack Bulard exercised even more stealth than before. On his hands and knees he moved toward the object of his search, parting the thicket as he went.

For a hundred yards he crept forward; then stopped and listened.

Not a sound was to be heard save the

sullen roar of the great river off to the west, and the rustle of the flags above and around him.

Then, suddenly, a piteous cry broke out, in a thicket just in front of him.

To creep forward and part the brakes was but the work of an instant, and as he did so, he started aghast with an exclamation of horror.

There, directly before him, was a pool of clear, crystal water, completely hedged in by the surrounding forest of flags.

Lying just on the edge of this pool, with its feet and little limbs submerged in the water, was a child—a mere infant in years, dressed in a baby's dress, which had once been white, but was now muddy, soiled and torn.

Jack Bulard's face was white with an awful feeling of terror, as he pulled the little sufferer from the cold water.

It was not dead yet, but he could see by the short, quick gasps for breath, that it could not have held out much longer.

It was evidently a girl, for its hair was long and sunny.

"Horrible," muttered the big-hearted borderer, tears standing in his eyes as he took the moaning object of pity upon his knee.

The waif continued to cry in a manner piteous to see, and its delicate white hand kept pointing toward the pool, as if to attract the hunter's attention to something buried beneath its placid depths.

At first, Bulard did not comprehend, clearly; then something akin to combined horror and dread attacked him, and laying the child upon the ground, he stepped forward, waded a few steps into the pool and peered down into the crystal water.

His great form shook with emotion, and his eyes bulged from their sockets, as he made a second discovery.

There, lying upon its back on the white, pebbly bottom, *was another infant!*

It was dressed like the first, and of the same size. Very likely the two were twins.

Awed! ay, horrified beyond expression, the borderer reached forward his foot, and stirred the body. Then he perceived that it was held down by weights, attached to its waist by strings.

After a moment, he staggered back to the shore, and seating himself by the side of the little girl, he bowed his face forward between his hands, and the tears fell from his eyes thick and fast.

It was some time ere he could control his emotion and raise the living child in his arms, and bear her toward his cabin.

Here he gave her up to Peggy, as, in his

rude but honest manner, he related what he had seen.

Peggy Bulard, though she had a long tongue, was the possessor of a large and kindly heart, and she received the little waif with true motherly affection, and left the wash-tub to nurse her back to life—which was an uncommon thing for Peggy.

Sad and sorrowful, Jack went back to the pool and fished out the body of the dead child, which he also bore to his cabin home.

Peggy laid it out in a white sheet, while out of doors Jack set to work, and out of a pine board made a rude coffin.

On the neck of the dead waif was found a strange scar—a birth-mark, doubtless, in the shape of a tiny hand, all the fingers and the imprint of the palm of the hand being quite distinct.

Also, around the neck of the little girl was a gold chain, to which was attached by a coral link a little locket set with precious stones.

"Peggy," said the borderer, "what're ye goin' to do wi' ther leetle girl?"

"Raise her, on course!"

"Thet's right, gal—right as a cokynut," he said.

The next morning the body of the little dead one was interred by rude but tender hands.

CHAPTER II

JONATHAN JERROLD, ARTIST

SEVENTEEN years later.

A company of about a dozen horsemen was riding leisurely across the great plains, at the close of what had been a sultry August day. All were mounted on spirited horses, and their dress plainly denoted their calling—that of the free ranger of the border.

The main party was headed by two men, who, evidently, were chief in command.

The one was a tall, muscular knight of the frontier, dressed in buckskin, with a face tanned to a nut-brown hue from constant exposure to wind and sun; piercing grey eyes, dark curling hair, and a heavy brigandish moustache of a like colour.

His companion, who rode by his side, was a sturdy, grim-faced young borderer, with a lithe yet muscular form, black eyes, and long, dark hair, that fell around his shoulders in profusion, while his face was shorn of all signs of beard. Both of the leaders, as well, in fact, as the whole of the cavalcade, were well armed.

"You're sure you can sight the cabin, ere darkness falls, Life?" asked he of the

moustache, with an uneasy glance toward the dry, red sun, which was dropping behind the horizon. "You are aware that we are now in the country of the Apache, and I am not too favourably impressed with the character of either the red or white inhabitants of the district we are about to enter; or, that is, I would not care to camp down on the plains here with this handful of men!"

"You talk like a hornet, captain!" said Lije, dryly; "but never fear. 'Less suthin' stranger'n I kno' of hes happened, I'll show ye Jack Bulard's cabin afore the moon's up. How's yer compass p'int now? 'Bout sow'-est, ain't et?"

"Yes," replied the captain, consulting the hands of the compass—"about that. A little to the south, if anything."

"Thort so. Ken't ginnerally fool the Leopard on his reckoning. Wal, sich bein' the case, I opine ye'll see that gal o' yer's in short order. Luv her purty strong, don' ye, boss?"

Captain Chris Adams flushed, but it was a flush of pride and pleasure that shot athwart his visage.

"Yes," he replied, "I love her passionately, madly. She is a pure and beautiful maiden, Lije!"

"Right, capten, sure's I'm a buffler-steak anihilater. I've kno'n Guess Bulard these ten year, and 'll go my last plug o' terbacker she'll make a thumpin' good wife. But, by my steak-eating proclivities, look *thar*! W'at in the name of the forty-'leven constellations o' stars duz thet mean?" he exclaimed suddenly.

Captain Chris gave the signal and every man drew rein at once.

Directly in front of them, though distant several hundred yards from where they had halted, stood a horse and wagon—the former, an old, scrawny, ribby sorrel, who looked as if it had never known the taste of hay or grain, while the latter was a small, rackety specimen of the canvas covered "schöoner," used by wagon-trains in crossing the prairies.

Between this strange conveyance and the cavalcade was a man, whose frantic hopping about and grotesque motions, first to his wagon, and then toward our friends, was intended, evidently, to warn them not to approach.

"Hold on a bit!" ordered Captain Chris, "and let's see what that lunatic means!"

The whole cavalcade pulled up abreast, and stared at the stranger.

As soon as he perceived that he had succeeded in bringing them to a halt, he skurried quickly back to the hind end of his vehicle,

and took therefrom a box not unlike a camera or photograph apparatus, which was attached to a tripod, or high three-legged stool. This he stood upon the ground, with the nose pointed toward his audience, and then again back to the wagon he skedaddled.

"Celestyal Singers!" exclaimed Leopard Lije, in wide-mouthed amazement, "w'at's that?"

"Durn my moccasins ef I know w'at it ar'," grunted the veteran of a hundred hair-lifts, Grizzly Len.

"I'll tell ye w'at I jedge!" ventured Fifth Avenue Sam. "Et ar' w'at them ar' consarned Britishers call a Gatlin'-gun."

"Celestyal Singers!" gasped the Leopard, as the stranger was now seen to approach the mysterious machine, "an' thar he cums wi' ther *ca't*-ridges now! Ter ther ground, b'yees, every mother's son on ye, and guv 'im a taste o' mineral substant from the Injin-territory lead-mines, ere he ken git hes infernal Gattler loaded!"

In an instant every man but Captain Chris was on the ground, and their horses were wheeled sidewise, as a breastwork, while eleven rifles bore down toward the lone stranger.

"Hold on, you confounded idiots!" here yelled Captain Chris, who had waited, with an amused smile, to see if his ignorant companions were really so deluded, "what in Heaven's name would you do?"

"Put up your guns, and mount!" commanded Captain Chris, as he at last saw the stranger emerge from under the cloth which enveloped the camera, and motion for them to approach.

The rangers sullenly obeyed.

"You see you were scared at nothing," resumed Adams, with a chuckle. "Do you not yet comprehend what yonder object is?"

"No!" growled Territory Tim.

"Well, then I'll tell you. It is an apparatus for taking pictures—photographs!"

"Wal, by thunder!" were the astonished exclamations on all sides. "Ye don't say!"

In a few moments the entire cavalcade drew rein in front of the camera, and the stranger, a large, portly personage with immense whiskers and eyebrows, saluted them:

"Haow d'ye do, gentlemen? What in creation was the matter wi' ye, when I was a-try-in' to take yer pictures a bit ago? Acted as how as ye were skeert!"

"They *were* frightened, the fools," laughed Chris. "Took your machine for a Gatling-gun, you see. But, who in Cain are you, governor?"

"Me—who am I?" exclaimed the

stranger, in surprise. "Is it possible ye never heard tell on *me*? W-a-l, thet's cur'ous! I'm the famed Jonathan Jeriah Jerrold, photograffical professor, stereoscopshunist, and artist in nature's sublime beauties!"

CHAPTER III

THE PRIER'S REWARD

"CELESTYAL Singers!" gasped the Leopard. "Then that ain't no gun, arter all, hey?"

"Certainly not," replied the artist. "It is an apparatus fur takin' a surperyer and kurrect repersentashun uv yer facial delineaments, an' then transferring them in a highly satisfacktory manner by the chemikal aid o' photogeric prossesses to er peece of paper."

"Ye don' tell us! So ye war tryin' ter steal our good looks, war ye?" growled Grizzly Sam, fingering his six-shooter.

"No! no! *no*!" cried Jonathan Jeriah, in abject terror; "don't shoot, Mr. Red-skin—*no*, drat it; Mr.—Mr.—Mr.—Ranger, I mean—please, doan't. I'll ax yer parding, ef ye won't shoot me!"

"Haw! haw! haw!" roared the borderers.

"Be quiet, boys," ordered Captain Chris, enjoying the scene quite as much as his companions. "Let *our* artist be. I say, governor, what are you doing out here in this Injin country?"

"I am in the employ of the Cosmopolitan and International Bureau of Art, and am bound for the great lava-beds *via* different routes, to photograph the spot where noble Canby fell," replied the photographer.

"So ye're goin' to try Modoc, eh? Well, before you go that far, just make your *will*! Your family will doubtless need the benefit derived therefrom."

"I say, captain," suggested the Leopard, "let's take him erlong wi' us. P'r'aps his consarned machine may skeer off ther 'Pash, when we git to ther gorge, and thereby save us a heep o' trubbel. An', tew, he ken fotergraff ther Demon Buffler!"

"Yas! yas!" put in the assemblage of fun-loving rangers, who foresaw a deal of sport in the companionship of this remarkable character who had so strangely fallen across their path—"take 'im erlong."

"Kind sirs, you greatly honour me, and if you thinketh that my company would be agreeable, I am not averse to linking my fortune with thine."

"Karect! thun et ar' settled; ye shall go 'lang. Ye shell see Cloven-Hoof, the

Demon Buffler o' Texas! Ye shall see heaps o' Injuns; an' sides, we'll all hev our pictures taken. W'at d'ye say ter et, Capten Chris? Hain't no 'jeckshuns ef we tote thes cornkrib erlong, hev ye?"

"No," said Adams, "if your fellows choose to encumber yourselves with such a charge. Remember, though, we have yet two days' hard travel before us; and how do you expect to make any progress with yon omnibus in tow?"

The rangers looked blank for a moment. They had not thought of the "schooner" and its ribby attachee.

"Never fear, sir," broke in the artist. "Though yon beast of mine shows unmistakable signs of decay in places where flesh should predominate, yet, rest assured, kind sirs, that her youthful spirit has not been smothered! *La Belle* can hold her own with any courser of the century. Wait till I load my wagon, and then lead on; I will follow!"

So saying, Jonathan Jeriah proceeded to pack the camera into the rear end of his wagon, and when this was done, he pulled down a long canvas curtain, so that none of the rangers' prying eyes should peer into the interior of his covered vehicle—inside the wagon.

Then, springing to a seat in front, he gave the word; the old sorrel stretched her bony neck, and struck out like a racehorse for the West, followed by the amazed, as well as amused cavalcade, whose animals were left in the rear.

By and by the artist drew rein and allowed the rangers to approach and take the lead, while the sad-looking sorrel shacked along at their heels, lazily, making no show of an effort to keep up, although the animals in advance were galloping along at a rapid gait.

On moved the caravan.

At length night closed in on the limitless expanse of plain; still the horsemen did not pause.

An hour passed and still no sight of the wished-for cabin.

At last the Leopard drew rein.

"Ther's no use trampsin' 'round enny longer, cap'n," he declared, "fur I opine I'll hev ter gi'n up beat."

So a halt was made, and the horses turned loose to graze. As all were trained animals, no fears were entertained of their going astray.

La Belle, however, had no sooner arrived at the conclusion that her day's work was at an end, than she very deliberately lay down in the shafts, and closed her eyes.

"Celestyal Singers," ejaculated Lije, "see thar, Peech-blossom—yer hoss as laid down

wi' her gearin' on. Shell we gi'n ye er lift to raise her?"

"No," said Jonathan Jeriah, coolly; "it is the way she usually sleeps!"

And while the rangers were making a fire, the artist gathered a handful of grass for his pet.

"See hyar," interposed Fifth Avenue Sam. "Is *thet* all ye allow yer anymile, old snoozer?"

"Wait till you see," replied Jerrold.

When a fire had been kindled, and each of the ranger brigade was engaged in roasting his slice of savoury venison, the artist disappeared within the sacred precincts of his wagon, and presently emerged bearing two formidable chunks of "b'ar-meat," which he fastened to the ends of a couple of sticks, and proceeded to broil at the fire.

He soon had the chunks of meat done to a fine brown. He then laid aside one for himself, and took the other over to *La Belle*, who, to the great wonder of all present, devoured it without a whimper, and immediately whined for more.

"That's a remarkable animal of yours, Cap.," observed Adams, as he finished his slice of venison.

After the meal was disposed of, the fire was permitted to expire; the horses were brought in and hobbled, and Grizzly Sam and Len went on guard.

Jonathan Jeriah sought the inside of his "schooner" to repose, and the lone camp in the heart of the great plains soon was wrapped in silence.

Before long the two guards fell asleep; they had ridden far that day, and were too exhausted to do further duty; so they imprudently slept at their post. Hardly had they become wholly oblivious to time and sense when a man crept near and peered ahead into the camp.

After a moment's survey of the sleepers, he glided still nearer, and soon stood at the rear end of the artist's vehicle.

After assuring himself that he was still unnoticed, he proceeded to survey the conveyance before him.

Reaching forth one hand, he unbuttoned the curtain, and lifting it on one side, peered in.

In an instant the loud report of a gun broke the stillness of the night, and the borderer staggered back, with an unearthly yell, for a portion of his cheek had been blown away, and his face was peppered in a pitiful manner, with fine salt and powder.

His wild yells brought every one of the rangers to their feet, and they huddled around him in surprise, awe, and amusement.

It was plain to see, however, that he was

more scared than hurt, as the wound in his cheek had not quite laid the bone bare.

"Here! here!" ordered Captain Chris, shaking him by the shoulder; "shut up your howling, or you will have the whole Apache nation down on us. Dry up. I say! What's the matter with you? Great Heaven! is it *you*, Jack Bulard?"

"*Me*? On course et's *me*—w'at leetle thar's left on me."

At Adams's expressed wish he then related what is already known to the reader.

"How is this, professor?" queried the captain, turning to Jonathan Jeriah, who had emerged from his mystery-enshrouded vehicle, and was looking at the borderer with a strange twinkle in his bead-like eyes. "Did you shoot Bulard?"

"Nay, kind sir. I was wrapt in the dormant inclinations unto Morpheus, like yourself, when yon prowling individual sought to penetrate the sanctity of my canvas-covered habitation, and incurred upon himself a just reproof for his audacious intrusion!"

"But what *did* the mischief? There was a report like a cannon, if I recollect!"

"Very likely, kind sir. The secrets of yonder studio are not for other eyes than mine, hence it behooves me to guard the rear entrance with a small salt-loaded howitzer, in the event of my nocturnal repose, while the foremost end I blockade with my body. The gun I keep constantly loaded, and after I button the curtain down as I intend it shall remain, it behooves no man to pry into the conveyance. I give you this explanation that each man present may profit thereby, and prevent disfiguration of their physiognomistical countenances!"

Jack Bulard eyed the artist savagely.

"Nevyar mind, old hoss," he groaned. "I'll git even wi' ye, yet, ef et takes till next year; I ain't no de'd owl, yit!"

"Never mind, Jack," said Captain Chris, consolingly. "You'll get well in a jiffy. Just tell me, where's your cabin and ranch? We could not find it, so we had to camp down here!"

"You're on my *ranch* now," growled Bulard. "'Pash burnt the cabin yesterday!"

"And the women? What of them?"

"Carr'd off, I reckon," was the reply, accompanied with horrible groans.

CHAPTER IV

OLD JACK'S STORY

CAPTAIN CHRIS ADAMS is so well known throughout the Far West and Nor'west,

that no words of ours are necessary to proclaim his fame.

Several weeks previous to the day when we first saw the "Invincibles" on the Texan plains, Captain Adams had received a call from Camp Supply, signed by several prominent citizens, requesting his presence there with his band of rangers. So, selecting twelve of his best men, he had left Fort Buford on the long and dangerous trip to the south.

The rangers, all old and toughened sprigs of the frontier tree, could stand almost any amount of hard riding.

Among them were men notorious for their daring, skill and bravery—such as Lije the Leopard, Fifth Avenue Sam, Beeswax (coloured), Grizzly Len, Grizzly Sam, Territory Tim, Alaska Ben, and others.

Finally arrived at Camp Supply, young Adams was not a little surprised to meet Governor Coke, who at once took the ranger into consultation.

The object of the call of the rangers from their northern home was soon made plain.

In the northern portion of Texas a great excitement prevailed which had become akin to a panic among the inhabitants in that section.

The prevailing mystery and excitement were produced by the appearance of an unknown and *unseen* band of desperadoes, styling themselves the *Vultures*, on frequently distributed placards, and who were headed by a nondescript being—a mysterious, cloven-footed creature, whom the more superstitious settlers firmly believed possessed of the devil.

This Cloven-Hoof, as it was called, was in bodily developments shaped not unlike a man, but the feet were cloven, like those of his Satanic majesty are supposed to be, while, instead of a *human* head, the gigantic head of a buffalo surmounted a large bull-neck, over which flowed a jetty mane. And, another wonder, the frightful object was possessed of no arms or hands. The lower part of the body was covered with glistening scales, like those of a fish, and, too, it was suspected that, together with all his other infernal qualifications, Cloven-Hoof was an amphibious monster.

This mysterious thing was wont to lead his men upon the settlements, and not unfrequently down against the wagon-trains, in the dead of night, and while he was attracting the attention of whatever sentinels might be posted, his minions would pounce upon and plunder the wagons.

Such was the idea the governor gave Captain Adams of the mystery.

So it was vitally necessary that the matter

should be thoroughly investigated; hence the ranger was summoned from his far northern haunts, and offered a munificent reward should he succeed in overhauling the band of outlaws, which he consented to do, and after a brief rest set out for Zosse, a little settlement nearest the principal scene of the depredations, armed with a letter from the lieutenant-governor to one Alonzo Nesmit, a leading spirit and citizen of the infested community.

Desiring, for a purpose best known to himself, to increase his band to twelve men, aside from their leader, Captain Chris had laid his course across the plains toward the cabin of his prospective father-in-law, old Jack Bulard, whom he hoped to enlist in his service.

Under what inauspicious circumstances the two met, we have already related. Let us, then, once more, look back upon the camp.

"Great Heaven!" gasped Adams, reeling back at Bulard's declaration; "carried off by the Apaches? Horrible! Go on, old man, and do not keep me in suspense. Tell me all!"

The old scout coolly seated himself upon one of the hubs of the wagon-wheels, and after filling and lighting his pipe, puffed away a few moments, contentedly.

"Ken't tell ye how et war dun, boyee," he replied. "Ye see I war out on er long trip up ter ther Platte, an' w'en I left hum ther women war gittin' erlong skrumphis-like; so I didn't worry much erbout 'em. But, yesterday, w'en I erriv'd back 'bout dusk, an' found thet ther 'Pash hed bin thar 'arly in ther mornin', an' cremated my ranch, I tell ye I war mad as er goose in settin'-time. I k'u'dn't find nerry sign o' ther fermernines, so I jedged they war amputated—no, thet ain't ther word; le's see! Abdicateded, am et, capten?"

"Abducted, you mean?"

"Yas—thet ar' et."

"How know you that the Apaches are the captors of Guessie and your wife?" demanded Captain Chris.

"Don't kno' fur sartin. Thar's a suthin' moighty cur'us 'bout et, w'ich I ken't parse in my grammer."

"And what is it?"

"Wal, I'll tell ye. I pried eround the premises, an' diskivered thet ther main heft on ther gang halted erbout two hundred yeerds off frum whar my ranch stood, an' near's I kuld jedge, they remained thar. I saw the tracks o' *one* animel, as were rid ter the cabin, when thar soon bercame *two* horses' footprints inst'ed o' one. But ther dickens o' et war, one hoss must hev hed

four feet an' t'other *two*, ca'se I could extinguish w'ar ther four-futted beast stood by ther larger tracks; an' see whar suthin' made er kupple o' tracks alone! An' quarest o' all, cap'n, not er *human* hoof-print could I deskiver—not er single sign o' un, tho' I s'arched high an' low!"

"Ha!" ejaculated Captain Chris, excitedly. "I believe, then, I have the solution of what seems a mystery to you."

Whereupon he related the strange story about Cloven-Hoof, and all about their present expedition to Zosseï, where they intended to begin operations. Bulard listened with the greatest interest.

"An' ye thenk my fermernines war kerried off by thes Cloven-Hoof?"

"I haven't the least doubt of it."

"Wal, boyee, I opine ye're right; but et ar' b'yant my grammer-pars'n erkomplishments. An' ye tell me ye're goin' right down ter hunt this critter?"

"Yes. We shall take up the trail of these horsemen in the morning, and by following it, I believe we will sooner or later learn something definite as to their whereabouts. Now, all hands turn in again. Morning will soon be upon us!"

The rangers once more rolled themselves in their blankets, and not deeming it necessary to post a guard for the remainder of the night, none was set. The artist retired to his vehicle, and soon the camp was wrapped in silence.

But ere they were asleep, fortunately a strange sound aroused them. It was the snort of Jerrold's animal *La Belle*—a snort that betokened affright.

Every man was on his feet in a moment.

Ten minutes passed in restless watching by the rangers.

"Celestyal Singers!" suddenly yelled the Leopard; "look thar!"

He pointed to the east, where a blood-red rocket had left the pall-shrouded earth, and was soaring far up and across the starlit sky, like a fiery serpent.

"Injuns!" cried Fifth Avenue Sam.

"Yas! an' 'Pash, too," assented Bulard.

And even as he spoke, a confused chorus of distant war-cries, coming from either direction, broke the stillness of the clear night!

CHAPTER V

THE SWOOP OF THE VULTURES

Not many leagues to the west of the settlement of Zosseï, which was to be the destination of Captain Adams and his "Invincibles," stands the little Spanish-Mexican town of Los Des Pumas.

On the night of the strange advent of the old borderer, Jack Bulard, into the rangers' camp, a scene was occurring at Los Des Pumas that we must record, as it will have a bearing upon our narrative.

About sunset a man rode into the little town from the direction of the range of mountains to the east, and demanded to see the officer in command, as he had important news to communicate.

On being shown inside the grim old ruins of the fortress, and into the presence of the *alcalde*, a small, evil-faced Spaniard, the stranger gave a sigh of relief, and accepted a proffered seat.

"Well——" began the Spaniard, but the stranger interrupted him.

"There is no time for parley," he said, hurriedly. "How many men can you arm, to repel an attack?"

"To repel an attack!" gasped General Murrillo, in amazement. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," was the reply, "that in less than an hour Los Des Pumas will be attacked by a large band of American soldiers, with the view to plundering the town, and subsequently turning it into a military post!"

Conales Murrillo grew ashen white, and sprang wildly from his chair.

"Dost speak the truth, man?" he cried, savagely.

"I tell you nothing that the hour will not prove. How many fighting hands can you mount and arm?"

"Every man and woman in Los Des Pumas, if necessary."

"Good. Listen, Senor Murrillo, and I will tell you my plans, as I have a vital interest in this town and its safety. Now, these Yankee fillibusters have pitched their camp in the valley two miles from this spot, and are preparing for a night charge on Los Des Pumas. They must not do it, senor—do you hear?—they *must* not attack the village. Mount yourself and every human under your command that can lift a rifle, and I will lead you against the accursed Yanks. From the bluff above the valley, we can charge down upon them, and sweep away their heft; and then no attack will be made!"

"But, senor, what shall be done with the children, and my lovely daughters, Nola and Inez?"

"Secrete them in the *mines* underneath us!" replied the stranger, watching the Mexican narrowly.

Murrillo leaped back aghast.

"Who are you?" he gasped, "that you know so much?"

The stranger smiled. He was a young

man in years, to all appearances, but his features were so covered with beard that it was next to impossible to make out their expression.

"Who am I?" he repeated, after stroking his beard for a moment, as if in deep thought.

"Well, my name is Pietro Gonzellos, and I am an individual who knows every crook and corner of Los Des Pumas, and also the secrets thereof. Is it not enough that I offer to save yours and yourself from capture—ay, perhaps death?"

"Yes; but let us not talk longer. You remain here, and I will order everything ready."

So saying, Murrillo hurried from the council-chamber, leaving Gonzellos alone.

No sooner had the *alcalde* disappeared than the stranger arose excitedly, and paced to and fro.

"It will work! It cannot fail to work!" he muttered. "Then!—"

He did not finish the sentence, for a light footstep upon the tiled floor close at hand, caused him to wheel around.

A maiden of some sixteen summers stood before him—a fair-haired, bright-faced creature, in whose soulful eyes gleamed the light of purity and truth.

Pietro Gonzellos sprang forward with a glad cry.

"Inez! Inez!" he exclaimed, as he clasped the maiden to his breast. "Thank God we meet once more!"

"Yes, Philip; but why are you here in this disguise? Does my father know you?"

"Yes; as Pietro Gonzellos. You recollect, dearest, that the life of Phil Warren would not be worth a whistle, were he to appear in Los Des Pumas undisguised. These accursed Greasers have no liking for the King of the Hills!"

And here the man gave vent to a merry laugh.

"Hear! there is the blare of the trumpet that calls me away! Adieu, sweetest! May my meetings with you henceforth be longer and more frequent!"

Imprinting a kiss upon the full, rosy lips of the maiden, Pietro Gonzellos turned and hurried from the room. In a dark passage he suddenly stumbled against Murrillo, the *alcalde*.

"Come!" ejaculated he, turning back and preceding the stranger. "I have all in readiness."

He led the way out into the courtyard that was fenced in by the grim old walls of the fortification. Here a strange scene was presented. Some hundred and twenty horses were drawn up abreast, their noses

facing the ponderous gates opening out into the village, and on their backs were mounted a motley crowd of men, women and children, armed with long lances and carbines slung to the pommels of their Mexican saddles.

The two men mounted their horses; then, as the fortress gates swung open, they led the way at a gallop in the direction of the little valley, followed by the motley band of "defenders."

Pietro Gonzellos took the command, and in half an hour drew rein at the foot of the hill beyond which wound the valley.

"You must all remain here!" he ordered, as he dismounted, "until you hear a shrill whistle. I will creep to the crest of the bluff and spy down upon the Americans in the valley. When I see a suitable chance for a charge against them I will give said whistle, when you must dash up the bluff and make a rush down upon them."

The next instant he had thrown himself upon all-fours and wriggled off through the darkness, which now enveloped the earth.

With great impatience the hot-tempered Mexicans waited for the signal, but an hour dragged by, and still there came not the promised whistle from the scout.

Murrillo finally uttered a savage protest, and urged his horse up the slope.

"Come on," he ordered, "and let's see what this means. Perhaps Gonzellos has been captured!"

The whole party spurred swiftly to the top of the bluff, and came to a momentary halt, while their eyes swept the little treeless valley below, which was flooded with soft white moonlight.

Not a person was to be seen!

Not a sign of a camp, nor where one had been pitched could be found on searching the valley.

They had been "sold," and for what?

Let us return to the "silent city," and see, in company with the angry cavalcade.

The deepest silence hovered about the old fortress and the low haciendas, outside the crumbling walls. The ponderous gates were wide ajar, and the trampled grass near by showed but too plainly the imprint of many horses' feet.

"Curses on us for a pack of fools," hissed Murrillo, dashing fiercely into the courtyard, and flinging himself from his horse. "In our absence the town has been *sacked*! Ho, there, you grovelings! Dismount at once and let a thorough search be made!"

And a search was made accordingly. Every residence in Los Des Pumas had been plundered.

The fortress had not escaped, for in an apartment where the *alcalde* kept his gold

and jewels was found his rifled desk. Everything was taken that was of value.

But, worst of all came, when Murrillo read the following on a placard that had been conspicuously posted in the council chamber:

"ALCALDE MURRILLO, DEAR SIR:—

"We, the Vultures of the Border, are very much indebted to you for the large quantity of gold which we found in the *mines* beneath this room. Likewise we are indebted to you for your two beautiful daughters, Nola and Inez, whom we adopt. The other *small-fry*—children—who were left to us, we took pity upon, and have shut them in a dungeon beneath the ruins. Having relieved you of all that can be of any future use to us, we shall not again trouble you until you unearth some more of that precious ore which lies beneath the fortress.

"Signed, VULTURES.

"Cloven-Hoof, the Infernal, Commanding!"

Directly beneath this were numerous dirty tracks upon the clean floor—tracks made by none other than the terrible and much-feared *Cloven-Hoof*!

In an hour when they were least expected the mysterious "Vultures" had swooped down on hitherto unmolested Los Des Pumas, and secured as spoils a couple of pretty maidens and a large quantity of gold in the rough and nuggets, with which they had long since escaped to their unknown retreat.

CHAPTER VI

THE "INVINCIBLES'" VICTORY

At the first sound of the savage yells the rangers, as of one accord, cocked their rifles and waited for the onset.

Nearer and nearer came the screeching savages, and then, all at once, a dozen dusky forms burst into view on either side, making the night hideous with their whoops of triumph.

"Fire!" shouted Captain Chris, "and then use your revolvers!"

Instantly there was a lightning glare of light which lit up the scene for a moment; then the report of fourteen rifles, drowning out even the Apaches' cries.

Then the "Invincibles," as the rangers were called, drew their revolvers, and poured a terrible fire into the dusky ranks.

Wild yells and groans rose on every side. Fifth Avenue Sam fell dead, with a lance through his body, and another of the hardy

band of rangers soon dropped in his tracks, with an arrow in his breast.

Among the fiercest of the rangers stood Jonathan Jeriah, and the detriment he did to the foe was equal to that of any man around him, if not more. But, at last, he became weak and faint from loss of blood, and soon he dropped his clubbed gun, and retreated to his "schooner." Not long was he gone, however, for he presently stood among his companions again, and on his shoulder he carried a light dismounted howitzer. The truck which stood at the rear end of the wagon was wheeled forward by Grizzly Len, and in a moment more the little bronze piece was trained down toward where the heavier part of the attack was being made.

It was quickly charged almost to the muzzle with bullets and slugs, and then, as at a word the rangers swerved to each side leaving an open path, the artist exploded his gun.

A roar that fairly shook the earth was the answer, and this was succeeded by a deafening chorus of shrieks and howls from the wounded redskins.

The charge had mowed down a wide path in the ranks of the foe, and caused them to retire panic-stricken.

Taking advantage of this lull, the rangers hastily reloaded rifles and revolvers, but not another shot or arrow was fired.

Morning finally dawned, and the rangers, to their astonishment, ascertained that not an Apache—except their dead—was in sight. They had temporarily withdrawn, doubtless to strengthen their forces.

After Jonathan Jeriah had placed his howitzer once more in the "schooner," he emerged from the canvas-cover with a spade, with which a large grave was hollowed out in the sandy plain. Here were interred the remains of the fallen; then the cavalcade resumed its journey toward Zossei, Jerrold bringing up the rear with *La Belle* and his peripatetic habitation.

All day the strange caravan struggled on, looking like a diminutive serpent on the boundless sea of level sand. At night a halt was again made, and after the evening meal was dispatched, a triple guard was posted.

The night passed without incident worthy of mention. As soon as it was barely light a start was made and no halt ordered until noon, when Captain Chris gave the signal for a stop.

After taking a map from his pocket and studying it intently for a while, Captain Chris turned to his men.

"Boys," he said, "we have come a long way out of our path. Zossei, as near as I

can ascertain, lies twenty miles to the north."

A growl of displeasure went up from the men.

"And 've we got ter wait hyar, or go up ter Zossei?" questioned the Leopard.

"Remain here, of course. You could do little or no good there. I find, by my map, that Zossei is on the banks of yonder dry water-course, and by following it, I shall experience no difficulty in finding the town. I shall start for there, at once, and you may expect me back by to-morrow night. Pitch your camp in the gulch here, and be sure and get it on an exact line between the dead and live timber. I can then easily find you on my return. Let me warn you all, however, not to venture too far in yon ghostly forest, which is known as the Phantom Forest. Now, good-bye to you."

And, touching the spur to his horse, Captain Chris dashed off toward the north.

Just as the red sun was nearing the horizon, Captain Chris struck into the one trail or "street" of Zossei, and galloped up to the saloon over which hung a sign, suspended by cords and staples to two lofty flag-poles, which bore these words:

"DUTCH FRED'S ZOSSEI RANCH."

On the steps of this edifice two burly half-breeds were loafing.

"Can you inform me where one Alonzo Nesmit resides?" asked Adams, as he reined in his horse.

Both men stared at him, curiously, but neither offered to answer the question.

"Confound it! can you not answer a civil question?" exclaimed the ranger, flushing angrily. "Then, I'll seek some other more civil informant!"

The loungers apparently had no objections, and so Chris rode on.

He soon came to a grocery store, in front of which sat a grim old fellow astride a saw-horse.

"Can you direct me to the residence of Alonzo Nesmit?" was the ranger's question.

The store-keeper looked up with a quizzical stare, but did not reply.

"Curse it! d'ye hear me speak, you old villain?" now shouted the ranger, quite beside himself.

Still no reply.

Chris drew a revolver from his belt, and cocked it, determinedly.

"Now give me the directions," he cried, taking aim, "or I'll——"

"Down thar's whar ther cunnel holds out!" growled the store-keeper, pointing one long bony finger toward a low ancient

hacienda of Spanish architecture, which nestled in the flats below the village.

Captain Chris put up his weapon, and galloped off down the slope, followed by a loud guffaw from the old man at the grocery.

"Curse it!" he mused, savagely, "I wonder what these close-tongued idiots mean?"

He pondered deeply on the subject as he galloped on. At last he drew up in front of the hacienda.

A roofed veranda ran all around the edifice, and on this a swarthy Mexican was lounging. As Captain Chris dashed up, he left his bench, and came forward, bowing with many smirks and smiles.

"I desire to see Colonel Nesmit," said the ranger, in the Mexican tongue.

"The senor will have to wait," replied the peon. "The master is at Zossei, and will return soon. Will the senor come inside?"

Dismounting and securing his horse, Captain Chris was ushered into a magnificently-furnished parlour.

"I'll send the master when he arrives," said the peon, and in a moment he was gone.

Captain Chris sank into a luxurious arm-chair, and stared about him.

Rare old pictures graced the frescoed walls, and beautiful statuettes faced from little alcoves into the room.

One picture in particular attracted the ranger's attention.

It was a large life-sized picture of a young Mexican cavalier, reaching from the floor to the ceiling.

The face was strangely life-like for a painting, and the form a model of perfection. But, most strange of all were the eyes. They were jet black in colour, and darted out an evil, snakish expression at the ranger that made him uneasy.

"Humph!" muttered Captain Chris, thoughtfully, "what can art not produce? Egad! if I did not know better I'd swear those optics were of flesh and blood."

Uncomfortable under the singular power that held his attention to the painted face, Captain Chris rose and strolled to the other end of the apartment. Happening soon after to glance back at the portrait, a chill of something akin to horror crept along his spine, as he perceived that those same snaky eyes were still riveted upon him.

With an impatient exclamation he turned his back upon the annoying sight. He was growing nervous.

Not many moments passed, however, ere he ventured to again glance at the face. An oath burst from his lips as he did so, for he distinctly saw those terrible orbs roll in their sockets!

CHAPTER VII

THE MOUNTAIN GROTTO

'WAY up among the peaks of a craggy and rugged chain of mountains, whose snow-capped crests seemingly touched the clouds, was a huge grotto, whose existence would not have been dreamed of by the inhabitants of the earth, far below.

It was a large natural honeycomb in the cold grey rock. Besides one principal chamber, there were a dozen other smaller cells, which ran back and were lost in a labyrinth of intricate and rough passages.

In the principal chamber was blazing a ruddy fire of pitchy cones, and before this fire, seated on blocks of solid rock, were three girls and an Indian.

Two of the girls, who resembled each other, were apparently sisters, and were strikingly beautiful.

They were the stolen daughters of Conales Murrillo, the *alcalde* of Los Des Pumas.

Though Inez and Nola Murrillo were very pretty after their fashion, the third maiden was more beautiful than either.

The Indian who made up the quartette was a brawny brave, with a handsome face, even though it was daubed with paint. He was armed with pistols, knife and rifle, and fastened upon his back was a bow and quiver of arrows.

Inez Murrillo was speaking :

"And are you sure that the intentions of this Cloven-Hoof are what you have told us, Philip?"

"Certainly, my dear. I would not lead you to fear what is false. I am seriously afraid that our terrible chief will do as he said—sell you to the Arapahoes for horses, which can be disposed of for large profits East. Not so with pretty women!"

"What kind of a monster is this robber chief—a demon?"

"A veritable evil spirit from hell, I firmly believe. Around him he has gathered as lawless a set of humans in the shape of men as years of secret search could discover."

"And you, Philip, who have won my love, serve in this gang?"

"Alas! my darling, I do, but it is not because I love the life. I am bound by an oath, for ten years, not to desert, expose, or otherwise work against this league. My ten years of bondage expire two months hence, and then if I cannot be again forced to take the binding oath, I will be killed!"

"Oh, Philip!"

"Yes, darling; I know it seems cruel, but trust in me; Phil Warren will never die without a struggle. A band of plucky

rangers are known to be entering this country to protect the settlers and to hunt us down. If luck should be in our favour, and you not carried off into the Arapahoe country, perhaps I can somehow effect your escape."

"But, Philip, I will never go back to Los Des Pumas."

"Nor shall you go there, dearest. In the leader of the expected ranger band I have an old-time mate—brave, true, and fearless Chris Adams, who will protect you for me."

The third maiden of the party uttered a low, glad cry.

"Adams—Mr. Adams, did you say?" she asked, eagerly.

"Yes; do you know him, miss?"

"Yes, sir, he is one of my best friends. In fact"—and the beautiful girl blushed scarlet—"he is to be my husband—that is, if I ever get free from this gloomy prison!"

The bogus Indian sprang to his feet with an ejaculation.

"Is that so? Well, then, I'm right glad to see you. I count Chris Adams as one of my best friends, too, though I'd be ashamed to have him know me as an outlaw. And what is your name, miss?"

"Guess Bulard, sir."

The disguised lover of Inez Murrillo reeled back as though he had been shot. "You are not the daughter of old Jack Bulard?"

"I am."

The bogus Indian took his seat again, and went off into a reverie. Finally he looked up, and said:

"This is news to me, miss. I have heard of you before, but did not dream you were the woman grown from a little child whom old Jack once rescued from a death in McKandlass swamp. Did he ever tell you about it, and of your little dead brother?"

"Yes, sir"; and the tears welled to Guessie Bulard's eyes. "I have wept many times on hearing my kind, adopted father rehearse the pitiful scene of seventeen long years ago. Poor papa, what has he thought, on his return, to see our little home destroyed, and Peggy and I gone! I'll bet the Apaches will ketch it!"

"Probably! As to old Jack's eccentric wife, there's something mysterious about her disappearance. The boys have searched high and low, but can't find her."

At this juncture Guessie Bulard sprang from her seat, and sped toward the little crevice looking northward, that answered the double purpose of a door and window to the grotto. From this aerial retreat a magnificent view of the surrounding country could be had—a strange, wild and weird prospect it was.

"What is it?" demanded Inez's lover, as the girl looked intently from the opening.

"See!" she replied, pointing toward where the dead and live forests met.

He came to the crevice and gazed out.

A company of horsemen had dismounted and were picketing their animals, while a single rider could be seen galloping rapidly off toward Zosseï.

He was no other than Captain Chris, on his way to the village, to interview Colonel Alonzo Nesmit.

CHAPTER VIII

THE CAMP IN THE WATER-COURSE

SHORTLY after they were left by Captain Chris, the rangers held a short consultation as to whether they should pitch camp down in the seam, that lay in front of them, or remain on the bank above.

After some discussion it was decided to camp in the water-course. But now a new difficulty presented itself.

The sides of the seam were so nearly perpendicular that the way to get down their horses was a puzzle; but when Jonathan Jeriah produced a couple of spades and as many picks, they began to hew a narrow path slantwise down the hillside to the bottom of the valley.

Taking turns, of ten, the men worked with a will, and soon had a good road into the dry water-course; for the soil was loose, and easily heaved aside.

The horses and Artist Jerrold's vehicle were then piloted down the declivity, and while old Jack set about constructing a rude lodge for a lodging-house, the remainder of the band hewed another road up the opposite side of the gully. Then two guards were stationed, and long before sunset the camp was in resting order.

The next thing to consider was something to eat, and with a view to procuring something fresh in the way of meat, Lije shouldered his rifle and set off into the Phantom Forest.

It lacked nearly an hour of sunset when he left the camp, and he hurried along, keeping both ear and eye on the alert, and examining any hollow stubs of trees and fallen trunks that he imagined might be the residence of such game as the partridge, bear, or woodchuck.

But all to no avail. The dead timber creaked and groaned above and around him, and not a sign of life, either animal or vegetable, was to be found.

The shadows of night had fallen over the

land ere the sharp-eyed hunter was aware of it, and presently the great round moon soared up and sent a weird flood of light in among the spectral pines.

With an impatient growl he checked his footsteps, and had decided to abandon the search and retrace the trail to camp, when his gaze suddenly became riveted upon an object a dozen yards distant up the water-course. It was something that would not have attracted the attention of one man out of fifty—a single projection above a fallen log, like a crotched limb, full of little prongs.

But the longer the Leopard looked at it the more satisfied he became that it was not the log's branch—not a limb at all, but the antler of a deer.

He picked up a good-sized pebble, and hurled it toward the log. Lo! and behold, it struck fairly and squarely against the projection.

Then there was a wild snort, a bleat that sounded almost human, and a huge buck sprang to his feet and glared around him.

The next instant the sharp spang of a rifle broke the stillness; the noble animal made an attempt to spring away, but stumbled and fell dead!

Licking his chops at the thoughts of the future feast, he was about to advance toward the outstretched deer, when his eyes became fastened upon something so horrible further up the gulch—something so terror-inspiring and frightful that he remained rooted to the spot, and his knees began to knock together and his teeth to chatter.

A buffalo of medium size, looking shadowy in the streaming moonlight, was ambling along, coming in the direction of the rangers' camp, and on his back, with the bridle-reins held loosely in his hands, was the *fiery human form of a man*, with a head the exact counterpart of the beast it bestrode, and feet like those of a young horse, but *cloven*!

A long, tawny mane swept over a bull-neck from the horned head, and a sickly, ghost-like yellow fire seemed to flame from every pore of the body.

The form from the waist to the hoofs was covered with fish-like scales, and these seemed to shed a silver lustre of wonderful brilliance.

But this was not all that Lije Mackkay, or the Leopard, as he is better known, saw, by any means.

Behind the first frightful spectacle came a score of purely white stallions in a train, mounted with tall, *headless* figures of ghostly-clad attendants, armed with gleaming lances.

All this, taken into consideration, and the

great moon shedding her most spectral rays of light down through the grim, towering pines, it was a scene to shake the nerves of the most lion-hearted man.

On came the headless horsemen, headed by the Buffalo Demon—on they came and still the Leopard stood rooted in his tracks, staring directly ahead, his face whiter than the shrouds that enveloped the headless trunks of the approaching horsemen.

Nearer drew the ghostly cortege and their demon leader.

Then came a spasmodic jerk, a gasp, and the ranger found the power to use his limbs. It was enough!

With a wild, awful yell of righteous horror, that would have put to shame the lustiest screeching Comanche, he turned about and sped down the old water-course, giving frightful howls and shrieks at every leap, and never looking right or left until he dashed into camp, where his mates were sitting around a camp-fire, smoking their evening pipes.

As may be supposed, the precipitate advent into their circle of the thoroughly scared Leopard, caused considerable consternation among the rangers.

When Lije came to a halt he was a sad-looking sight.

"What'n ther devil's ther rip?" demanded old Jack, cocking his gun.

"*What?*" burst forth the Leopard, dashing the sweat from his brow—"what? Why, God above us, b'yees, ther ginnywine Devil himself, rite erway down frum hell an' purdishment, ar' er kummin'! Yes—an' ther hull reggyment o' his satanic imps ar' with him. Quick! all han's, hyar! Git ther 'osses up ouden this gulch. Ther kussed kerryvan 'll be on us, quicker'n a painter kin wiggle his tail!"

Seeing that something indeed was the row, the rangers set to work and hustled the animals up onto the bank above, followed by Jerrold and his "schooner." Then they lay low at the edge, and waited. Presently Lije whispered:

"Look!—b'yees—look! *Thar they kum a-yoopin'! Oh! Celestyal Singers!*"

CHAPTER IX

COLONEL NESMIT

WE left Captain Chris in the parlour of the Nesmit hacienda, glaring at the moving eyes in the portrait before him.

Yes! they really *moved*—moved from something they had previously been gazing

at, and glowered down upon the ranger once more.

"Great miracles, this beats my reckoning. I never knew that pictures had movable optics before. Dash me, but I'll know the meaning of this, if I die for it!" muttered Adams, drawing a revolver.

While he was thus engaged, the eyes in the portrait *disappeared* for a single second, but when he glanced up, a pair of *blue* eyes were staring down at him. The ranger, however, did not notice the change.

Grasping his revolver in the left hand, and his long sharp-pointed knife in the right, he advanced close to the picture, narrowly watching the eyes. They seemed perfectly stationary, and did not move in the least.

Raising his right hand, Captain Chris made a motion as though he intended to bury the knife in the smiling face.

But the eyes did not stir. They were fixed and glassy in their stare.

Thoroughly exasperated, the ranger touched the pupil with his knife-point.

It came in contact with a hard substance of a flinty nature.

The eyes were glass!

With a baffled cry Chris staggered back to the chair he had previously occupied, and sank down among the cushions white and faint.

Adams was seriously cogitating over the plan of a renewed attack upon the offending portrait, when a man entered the parlour.

"Ha!" he said, advancing, with a pleasant smile, and extending his soft, white hand—"Captain Adams, I believe, is it not?"

"Exactly," replied the ranger, cordially, "and you are Alonzo Nesmit?"

"The same. I have been looking for you; for the Lieutenant-governor wrote me you were on the way. So you think you have the courage to brave this mysterious Cloven-Hoof, eh?"

"I reckon if courage's all that's wanting, I've got a liberal allowance of the requisite!"

"That is good. Have you your men close at hand?"

"No. I left them at the line on the old water-course, between the dead and the live belt of timber, twenty miles to the south."

"The deuce you did! Well, that is lucky. I should have sent you down in that direction, anyhow, had you all first come to Zosse!"

"Now, about these robbers? Have they made any recent raids in this vicinity?"

"Indeed, yes. A courier arrived to-day, with the news that the wily inhabitants of our neighbour town, Los Des Pumas, have

been lured from the village by a traitor, with a view to repelling a reported invading band of Yanks, and while absent, the Vultures swooped down on the place, and sacked it, also making captives of the *alcalde's* two daughters."

"Humph! that's bold. But, do you know this *alcalde* personally?"

"No! He is a Mexican, I believe, and having never met him, I do not know him, nor do I want to."

"Best not to be *too* intimate with a *Greaser*, that's so. I hate 'em like I do the red-skins—which, I judge, are the nobler of the two. Have these so-called 'Vultures' ever made any attempts upon Zossei?"

"No! but we are momentarily expecting them."

"Do you imagine they will be bold enough to make an open attack?"

"No, I think not. They do not come out boldly, or we should then be better able to protect ourselves."

"Have other rangers than my band, ever tried to discover the outlaws?"

"No;—only one attempt has ever been made against them. That was when my son Alf, alone and unarmed, attempted to track them far up the water-course to the mountains."

"Your son?"

"Yes—or, that is, the child I have always called my son. He was thirty-five years old, the day he left on that fatal mission. Poor fellow! I would that I knew whether he is living now, or dead. He never returned. If he is living, Adams, the robbers have undoubtedly imprisoned him in their secret den. Yon picture is a correct likeness of him—so if you should ever see him, do not strike him down!"

He pointed to the portrait.

Involuntarily the ranger gave a quick, searching glance at the eyes, but they were fixed perfectly stationary.

After conversing for about an hour longer, and obtaining all the information he deemed requisite, in the work before him, Captain Chris arose to leave.

"What! you do not intend to start for camp at this unseemly hour?" exclaimed the colonel.

"Yes, I feel that my presence may be needed with the band. Something tells me that there will be trouble soon, and if there is any fighting to do, I want to have a hand in it! Here, you peon, bring me my horse."

The horse was soon forthcoming, and Captain Chris sprang into the saddle and galloped away.

He soon reached the wooded banks of the

channel, and turned his course to the south.

Like a pair of shadows, two men emerged from the cover and sneaked after him. When they had gained considerably on the unsuspecting horseman, and were within easy rifle-range, they both stopped in their tracks, raised their rifles, and fired.

Then, as the ranger's horse uttered a piteous scream and sank upon the ground, the ruffians drew their revolvers and leaped forward.

CHAPTER X

THE NAVAJOES

It was as the Leopard said.

Cloven-Hoof and his Phantom Cortège were coming into view, riding leisurely down the channel.

There were more than one pair of bulging eyes among the watchers on the banks above, as they saw the terrible spectacle advancing toward them; the frightful Demon Buffalo wrapt in his sheet of fiery flame, and his ghostly train of spectral attendants bringing up the rear on their white steeds.

On came the cavalcade.

As they approached the foot of the road which led up from the bottom to the banks, the horrible thing on the buffalo's back drew rein, and glared directly up toward the white-faced rangers.

A screech of horror burst from their lips.

Then there came a ferocious snort from the Demon, and he urged his savage-looking steed directly ahead, followed by the Phantom Cortège.

They were coming up the road!

"Quick! for God's sake!" exclaimed the artist. "Pour in a volley!"

Every rifle was levelled, except the Leopard's. He had left that far up the water-course.

Snap! *The flash of the caps was the only answer to the trigger touch!*

The loads had been withdrawn!

A howl of baffled rage escaped the rangers, and they drew back out of sight for a moment, followed by an infernal chorus of blood-curdling shrieks from the spectres.

"Quick! your revolvers—are they, too, unloaded?" cried Jerrold.

An examination proved that they were intact.

"Now, then, take steady aim, and fire!" was the next command.

Once more they crept forward, and peered over into the channel.

To their unbounded surprise they perceived that the Demon Buffalo and his ghostly cavalcade had wheeled their steeds,

and were galloping far off up the water-course; and in a moment more they disappeared entirely from view!

"Celestyal Singers!" cried the Leopard, "they're gone, an' I'm kussed glad on't!"

It was decided that it would not be best to camp in the water-course again, so the rangers stretched themselves upon the bank and dropped asleep, leaving Grizzly Len on guard.

On the following morning Lije, the Leopard, and the coloured member of the band, whom we have previously mentioned as Beeswax, started off up the water-course, to search for the buck which the former had shot.

About noon considerable excitement was created in the camp by the discovery that a band of mounted Indians had sighted and were approaching the camp. But the surprise was not less when old Jack announced that it was a small reservation of Navajoes, and headed by his old friend, Stinging Wasp.

As among the band there were seen to be about a dozen squaws and children, it was rightly conjectured that they were not a hostile party, and consequently were allowed to come up unmolested.

After the cavalcade, numbering some hundred braves and squaws, had dismounted, old Jack explained to the Navajoe the meaning of their presence so far from the scenes of their former operations, and all about the Demon Buffalo and his Phantom Cortège. After being offered for his services all the outlaws scalps he could take, Stinging Wasp finally consented to encamp in the vicinity, and assist in the capture of the robbers.

During the afternoon their horses were unpacked, and soon a couple of skin lodges were erected on the banks of the water-course.

Further excitement was caused towards evening by the arrival at the camp of Peggy, Jack Bulard's missing wife.

CHAPTER XI

THE LEOPARD'S TERRIBLE RIDE

AFTER leaving the camp in the morning, Lije and Beeswax made their way cautiously down the water-course, and in the course of an hour came to the spot where the Leopard had shot the deer on the previous night.

But they were doomed to disappointment. The deer was gone.

Doubtless Cloven-Hoof and his crew had seen fit to appropriate so valuable a prize to their own use.

"Celestyal Singers!" ejaculated Lije,

much chagrined at the loss; "I'll be teetotally transmoggerfied ef ther kusses hain't abduckted my pill-box, too. I left it lyin' hyar, w'en I lit out fur kamp, an' now she'm gone. Now, I'm minus my gun, an' there's not ernuther 'n'kamp ter spar'."

"M'aps dat you find de gun up in de robber camp," suggested Beeswax.

"Yes—I specillate ye're plum thar, but whar d'ye hev an ijee thet ar'?"

"Bress me; I dunno no more'n de blackest piccaninny in de world! S'pec's dey am in de mountings. S'posin' we gwine up dat way, Elijer?"

"Dat war jes' w'at I was roominatin' on," said the Leopard, reflectively. "Reck'n we *will* go!"

"All right, Lije, gwy ahead, an' dis chile'll stick clusser to you dan Sorgum Lassies to a nigger's heel!"

Leaping over the fallen log, the twain followed the plain trail of horses' feet, which had been made by the animals of the Phantom Cortège.

Soon they reached the crest of the little slope in the channel, and could see that it now ran on as level as in the vicinity of the rangers' camp.

Scarcely any light penetrated the deep place except from occasional rifts in the tree-tops overhead, but this was not sufficient to permit the two men seeing very far in advance. Silence seemed to reign over all nature.

For hours the two men kept on, and still the old water-course stretched off like a serpent before them. It was gradually rising in grade, however, and Lije entertained some hopes of reaching the end before long.

About sunset Beeswax suddenly came to a halt.

"'Sh—!" he motioned to the Leopard; and then pointing ahead through the gloom, he continued: "Look, Elijer, look! Golly; d'ye know w'at dat am?"

The ranger uttered a low exclamation.

"Transmoggerfy me inter er Senator," he whispered, excitedly, "ef thet ain't er buffler—the same kritter w'at ther Deemen rid!"

It was indeed so. Lying contentedly down on the sand, about thirty yards above them, and munching away at a pile of freshly gathered grass, was the savage-looking steed of the mysterious Cloven-Hoof.

As the watchers' eyes became accustomed to the light centred around the beast, they perceived that he was bridled, as on the previous night, and that there were no persons in the immediate vicinity.

"What am de best t'ing to do?" inquired Beeswax.

Lije reflected several moments, seriously ; then a wild, dare-devil light crept into his eyes, as he replied :

"Ye stay hyar, an' continny the s'arch, niggur, an'——" Here he began to tighten his belt.

"W'at'n de deuce *you* gwine to do?"

"Wal, jes' ye stay hyar, as I tole ye, an' I'll show ye, prisently. I'm goin' ter *ride thet buffler down ter camp!*"

Beeswax put up his hands in surprise and horror, but the daring ranger was creeping away, ere he could express himself.

No difficulty was experienced by the Leopard in approaching the beast. He had evidently been thoroughly tamed, and did not even arise until Lije seized him by the bits, and gave his mouth a fierce jerk. Then he sprang nimbly upon his back, just as the steed leaped to his feet with a snort of anger. From that instant began a wild and ludicrous race.

Off leaped the novel steed at a fearful speed, directly after poor Beeswax, who, not relishing the situation, had turned his toes toward camp, and was "leggin' it" for dear life.

On plunged the buffalo with terrific snorts, and on leaped Beeswax like a frightened rabbit.

The Leopard tried in vain to moderate the speed of his war-horse ; but Mr. Buffalo seemed determined on overtaking and trampling down the African ! On—on—on, and the gravel and sparks flew from under their feet, and the snorts of the bull and the terrified yowls of Beeswax made the welkin ring.

Skilful equestrian though he was, Lije was not at home on the buffalo's back, and it was only by the most strenuous efforts that he retained his position by clinging to the long hair of the animal's neck. To fall from the buffalo's back, at the speed they were now going, would only be to meet instant death.

On—on, and the Leopard saw that they were nearing camp. In an instant he set up a series of frantic screeches, which, combined with those of Beeswax, soon brought the whole camp to the edge of the banks above.

"Stop us!" shrieked Lije, white with terror and exhaustion ; "stop us! stop us! Cuss our foolish picters, hyar we kim er-boomin'!"

CHAPTER XII

THE MEXICAN ALCALDE

"BIMSTIFFEROUS brimstun!" cried Circus Pete, as he and his companions, on the

elevated banks, saw the buffalo come tearing down the channel, with the Leopard clinging to his back, and Beeswax bounding along in advance. "Thar kums my pard, an' he ar' in a powerful bad fix!"

The rest of the rangers had gathered at the verge as had also all of Stinging Wasp's party—an expression of amusement on each and every face.

There were two, however, who perceived that the race would not terminate without serious results, if something was not speedily done. These were Circus Pete and Jerrold, the artist.

"Quick!" exclaimed the latter, excitedly, as he cocked his gun. "Some one of you fellows hurl a lasso over the head of the Leopard. The moment he is dismounted, I will agree to dispatch yon beast. I can fetch him to the ground, I opine."

Circus Pete heeded the words, and in a moment disengaged the coiled lariat from his belt.

On came the infuriated bull, and as he came nearly opposite where the rangers stood, Pete hurled his lasso downward ; and as at this moment, the Leopard straightened bolt upright, the noose settled gracefully around him, and drew taut.

The next moment he was jerked to the ground, stunned and bleeding, while the report of the artist's rifle broke the silence, which had for the instant ensued. The buffalo gave a few more maddened snorts and plunges after Beeswax, who had succeeded in reaching the road leading up the bank ; then the beast staggered blindly about, fell upon his knees, toppled over, and his life-blood dyed the sandy bottom of the channel.

A yell of admiration from the Navajoe braves now rent the air, and a rush was made to the river bed.

The buffalo was found to be quite dead. Jerrold's bullet had reached him, just back of the shoulder, and ended his mad race quickly.

Though considerably bruised by his fall, Lije was not seriously injured, and soon recovered enough to relate his and Beeswax's experience.

The latter was so exhausted from the effects of his remarkable foot-race, that he was unable to speak for several hours ; but, in the meantime, Lije discoursed sufficiently for both, so that nothing was lost.

The evening was spent in planning, and conversing about the supposed Phantom Cortege and Cloven-Hoof.

It was proposed to sit up all night and watch for the Phantom Cavalcade, and make up for their loss of sleep on the following day. Besides, Captain Chris was momentarily

expected, as he had said he would be back by that night.

But the long hours passed away, and the beautiful sun once more replaced the light of the moon—a calm morning dawned, and still the captain did not come; neither had a sight been seen nor a sound heard of the spectral band.

The forenoon passed, and still young Adams did not return.

The broiling sun had now reached the meridian, compelling the rangers to seek the cool shadows of the deep channel for comfort.

Jonathan Jeriah, however, bade defiance to the glaring rays, and drove *La Belle* and his schooner several miles off to the south, to find subjects worthy of photographing.

During the afternoon a company of a dozen horsemen were seen approaching, and the rangers made ready to receive them, were they friend or foe.

As they dashed up, they were found to be a band of well-mounted and well-armed Spanish-Mexicans, under the *alcalde* of Los Des Pumas, Murrillo.

"Good-morning," said the latter to Lije, as he doffed his sombrero.

"Gud-arternoon!" replied the Leopard, coolly.

"Independent rangers, eh?" asked the *alcalde*.

"I reckon!"

"Well, then, I'm glad it has been my good fortune to meet you."

Then, in a few words, the *alcalde* related the circumstances connected with the swoop of the Vultures down upon Los Des Pumas, and the abduction of his two daughters.

"Wal," said the Leopard, when he had concluded, "w'at's thet got ter do wi' us, I shed loike to 'quire?"

"This!" was the reply. "I have found a way by which I can penetrate the den of these Vultures, but my forces are not strong enough to permit of such a move. By consolidating our bands we would outnumber the robbers, and we can clean them out; you can earn your reward, and I can recover my daughters!"

"Yes—I perceive," answered the Leopard, grimly. "Ole hoss, d'ye see thes road hyar w'at leads down inter ther channel, an' thet t'other 'un w'at leads up onter ther banks yander?"

"Yes; I see the newly-made passes, sir. What about them?"

"Wal, thet's 'bout ther quickest way ye ken git erkross, an' av'ide gittin' riddled wi' ca't-ridges!" was the cool reply.

"What! do you intend to show hostility to us?"

"Shan't say ernuther syllybull, Greaser, 'cept thet ef ye don't make yersel' rare, hyar'bouts, inside o' ther wiggle o' er mother-in-law's lip, my b'yees 'll not be holdable fur enny accidenx w'at 'll be sure ter foller."

At a word the *alcalde* ordered his followers to cross to the other side of the water-course, for he perceived that the rangers were ready to do the Leopard's bidding, and should he refuse, a general fight would ensue, which must eventually be attended with a loss of life.

So, one by one, the horsemen filed down the crumbling path into the channel, for it was dangerous for two to attempt to go abreast; and soon half of the number were evenly distributed along down, leaving Murrillo and the other half above.

It was at this instant that a prolonged yell drew the attention of every man to the south—along the course of the channel.

A man mounted upon a bony sorrel horse was spurring madly down upon the camp, yelling and gesticulating wildly.

It was Jerrold, the artist, on the back of his *La Belle*—coming on, furiously on. Far away behind him, could be seen the deserted "schooner," from which he had disengaged his scrawny horse, to facilitate his speed.

On—on, he came, and struck dumb with astonishment at the sight, the rangers stood motionless, and watched him approach.

Not so with Conales Murrillo.

He started and grew deathly pale, as he beheld the wild rider, and clutched at his rein nervously.

"Never mind me," he fairly hissed, to his men, "but go on 'cross, and flee for Los Des Pumas. I will—ay, *must* go the other way!"

Unnoticed, then, he turned his horse stealthily toward the north, and was well out of rifle range ere the rangers became aware of his escape. Then he drove his spurs deep, and dashed away.

On—on, came Jerrold, his scrawny mare fairly flying over the ground, and making the sparks fly at every bound.

On—on, he sped, dashing furiously past the camp, and on after the fugitive, never allowing his eyes to leave the object of the mad pursuit.

Wildly, determinedly on did the terror-stricken *alcalde* urge his already jaded horse, but the artist gained upon him constantly.

It was fully five miles yet, to the only place where a crossing over the channel could be effected.

Three miles whistled by.

If he could only reach the "ford," the

Mexican knew he could evade his pursuer, and gain an opportunity to use his rifle.

Far away looms up a lone cottonwood tree, which marks the ford. But, ha! look!

From this direction now appears another horseman, coming south. With a horrible imprecation, Murrillo wheels his horse to the northeast, hoping to avoid a meeting. But the newcomer also varies the course of his animal, to head him off. Directly in the rear are heard the thundering hoof-strokes of *La Belle*, and the cries of the artist. Capture is inevitable between the two foes, the fugitive perceives, and shifting his position so that he faces Jerrold, he unslings his rifle and brings it to bear.

But, at this instant, his exhausted beast stumbles, falls upon its knees, regains its feet again by a fierce effort, stumbles once more, and then goes crunching to the earth, precipitating the doomed rider heavily upon the rocks in front, stunned and bleeding!

CHAPTER XIII

BEFORE THE VULTURE COURT

ERE Captain Chris could disengage himself from the saddle, as his dead horse sank to the ground, the two ruffians were upon him, and in a moment had him overpowered and disarmed. After that it took but a short time to bind him, hand and foot, with stout buffalo cords.

"Devils!" cried the surprised ranger, "what means this outrage?"

"It means that you are my prisoner," said one of the men, looking down into the captive's face with a hideous leer. "Do you know me?"

Captain Chris eyed him a moment; then the vision of the portrait in Nesmit's hacienda rose before him. It was the same as the face bent toward him now—*this* was the son of the colonel!

"You are the son of Alonzo Nesmit, are you not?" he asked.

"The same. I am the noble fellow he told you he believed to be a captive among the Vultures. Ha! ha! ha!"

"But why do you laugh? How know you he told me so?"

"Because I overheard him!"

"Then it was you who owned the human eyes in the picture?"

"Exactly; I own the same peepers you would have jabbed your knife into. But fortunately I had a pair of glass substitutes ready!"

"How did you get behind that portrait?"

"There is an alcove just behind it, open-

ing into a disused passage. I take the liberty to use this when I see fit to spy upon the old gent! Wal, I guess we haven't any more time to converse at present, so inhale a little of this perfumery, and then we'll jog along toward the 'Vulture Castle,' where his infernal majesty, Cloven-Hoof, is waiting to see you."

So saying, the outlaw took a sponge which his companion had in the meantime saturated with chloroform, and held it close to the ranger's nose. Though he did not yield without a struggle he soon gave in to the seductive influence of the drug; and for many hours thereafter he was unconscious.

When he awoke it was with a violent start, and he found himself in a mighty cavern.

He was lying on a bench, or sort of rudely-constructed table, and from the position in which he lay could command a view of the whole interior of the cavern.

Directly opposite, but some twenty feet from where the ranger lay, rose a long dais, on which was mounted a box-like affair, resembling a pulpit. Before this pulpit were a dozen camp-stools, and upon these sat as many white-robed figures, *headless*, to all appearances.

At the further end of the council-room sat a dozen Indians, whose hair and crowns proclaimed them to be chiefs.

Captain Chris regarded the scene about him with exceeding interest.

Presently there was heard the tinkle of a bell, and to his surprise and horror he saw the head and neck of a buffalo rise above the top of the pulpit, and the glaring eyes gaze around the apartment.

At the same instant while Adams was staring at the frightful object in front of him, a party of four persons entered the council-chamber and drew nigh to the pulpit.

One was the man who had been with Nesmit at the time of the ranger's capture. The other three were females—the Murrillo sisters, and Guessie Bulard.

Captain Chris gave a low cry as he caught a glimpse of the maiden's face.

Presently the thing behind the pulpit gave an initiatory snort, and then the following words, in a deep, rumbling voice, rolled forth:

"The time is at hand when the fifth monthly session of the infernal order of 'Vultures' shall take place, providing the Spirit Brotherhood are prepared for the points to be discussed and argued, for the mutual advantage of the most high order. Are the Spirit Jurors all in readiness?"

There was a heavy rumbling sound like the muttered growls of thunder, accompanied by hisses as of lightning flashes, all seeming to emanate from the rock beneath the seats of the silent white-robed figures.

The figure behind the pulpit soon gave a commendatory snort, and resumed:

"The Spirit Jurors are wise. They are ever ready for the Grand Council, and therefore they please the great Satanus. Before the Brotherhood to-day stand three creatures of the feminine sex, who were captured by the majestic order recently, and presented to their Ruler. But, though he is greatly pleased at the gift of his esteemed servants, Satanus has no use for women, and has therefore offered them for sale or in exchange for ponies to the chiefs of the Arapahoes.

"Several of the same are now present in the Royal Court. Let them come forward and state the sums they would expend for the possession of the pale-face maidens."

At this juncture the Indians in the farther end of the cavern drew near, and gazed at the shrinking girls.

At last one burly chief fixed his gaze upon Guessie, and a gleam of admiration flared up into his eyes.

"Ugh!" he grunted, seizing her by the arm. "Storm-Cloud, he *big* chief. Thirty lodges in him village by Fox creek. He gib ten hosses fur dis squaw."

A roar of dissent seemed to come up from the bowels of the earth.

Astounded at this answer to his proposition, Storm-Cloud sneaked back, and another redskin took his place.

"Metomula great chief," he said, proudly, "an' got heap hoss. He gib hundred hoss for t'ree squaw. Ugh!"

"Me gib hundred and ten hoss!" cried the next, bound to outbid his brothers.

So the bidding went on, after a lively fashion, until a hundred and fifty horses were offered for the three trembling young girls, when the eleventh chief took the stand, a disdainful smile upon his stoical face.

"Ugh!" he said, with a gesture of disgust toward the other reds—"dey no good. Big Rogue *much* big chief. He been to Great City, an' see Big Father. He got many horses. De squaws must be his. He gib two hundred horses!"

A cry of rage went up from the ten listeners.

"Wagh!" sneered Storm-Cloud. "Big Rogue big *sham*! He only got hundred hoss. Where he git de odder hundred? Ugh!"

"*Steal um!*" was the reply, delivered in such a seriously comical way that even the Spirit Jurors could not restrain a laugh.

"Good!" nodded Cloven-Hoof, from behind his pulpit, with an approving snort. "Is there any of the worthy chiefs, now, who wish to bid more?"

"There is," said the twelfth savage, stepping forward. "Sky-Rocket is not an Arapaho chief, but a chief of the mighty Apache nation, who are on friendly terms with the Vultures. He will offer three hundred ponies for the white squaws!"

"Sky-Rocket is a brick," said the Demon Buffalo, with a snort, intended to declare his satisfaction. "Now will the other chiefs raise him on that?"

The Arapahoes shook their tufted heads sullenly, and retreated to the further end of the cavern.

"Very well," decided Cloven-Hoof. "The pale-face girls are Sky-Rocket's. Whenever he wishes to depart I will furnish him with animals to carry them to his village. Also will I send men to bring back the three hundred ponies."

"The Great Ruler is wise. At the rise of the next sun Sky-Rocket will start, for his village is three suns' distant, and he must return to his people. But he has yet another dozen horses to spare, and will give them to the great Cloven-Hoof for yonder captive pale-face dog!"

Cloven-Hoof retired behind his pulpit for a moment, doubtless to reflect. But he soon reappeared, and gave his customary initiatory snort.

"Spirits of the Infernal Order," he said, "you have heard the words of the Apache chief. Are you or are you not opposed to the acceptance of his offer?"

There was again heard the rumbling as of distant thunder; then all was silence.

"They have no objections to the offer," said Cloven-Hoof, addressing the chief. Then turning to the outlaw, who had ushered in the maidens, he continued:

"You, Aspero, go at once to the band, and tell them of the offer we have had for the pale-face ranger, whose camp lies at the further end of the Phantom Wood. Also, tell them to rejoice and drink freely over the fortunately high disposal of the girls, which will net each member a good round sum!"

Aspero bowed low, and in a moment more was gone, having left the great chamber through a fissure in the wall.

After several minutes Aspero came bounding back into the chamber, white and breathless.

"The boys say dispose of the ranger as you choose!" he cried—"but, captain, you are wanted at the ranch. The member known as King of the Hills is *gone*!"

"Curses upon him!" roared Cloven-Hoof, savagely. "Here you, Sky-Rocket; you remain till I return! The scout shall be yours."

In an instant the Demon Buffalo had vanished behind his pulpit, and Aspero also had disappeared through the fissure.

Then, quickly approaching Captain Chris, Sky-Rocket whispered:

"*Sh—! Keep quiet. I am a friend!*"

CHAPTER XIV

THE RANCH

LET us follow in the tracks of the mysterious Cloven-Hoof.

Directly behind his pulpit was a trap-door, opening down through the floor of the dais. After disappearing from the view of the prisoners, the strange being pulled up the door, and a dark, narrow staircase, hewn out of the solid rock, was revealed.

Following this in its downward course, he presently came to a large apartment, similar to the council-chamber above, and which was dimly lit by a smoking torch, thrust in a crevice.

In this cavern were a number of casks and barrels strewn about; also several fireplaces, over which hung monster caldrons, were set in the rocky sides of the wall.

There were no persons to be seen about the premises; and so, after casting a searching glance about him, Cloven-Hoof directed his footsteps toward the eastern end of the cavern, where a natural door opened out upon a large level plateau.

From here a marvellous and strikingly beautiful view could be had of a strange and weird scene.

Below the plateau, some thirty feet, was a large circular basin or mountain-locked valley, where some forty acres of land lay as smooth and level as on the great plains. All around towered giant walls of cold grey rock, rising up in perpendicular bodies until they seemed to touch the blue vault of heaven.

Down in the valley was a scene as strange as the one presented by the towering mountains—a scene suggestive of the retreat of the mountain outlaw.

A large, long, barn-like cabin, built partly of logs and partly of adobe, nestled in the centre of the basin, and around this grazed some fifty snow-white ponies. Here and there were flitting the forms of men attired in the garb of the mountaineer, while at the door of the ranch, as the cabin was called, were huddled together a motley

assemblage of coarse-featured, evil-faced desperadoes.

Pouring down with a musical roar from the southern end of the valley, as it came leaping on its downward flight over the majestic mountain crags, dashed a mighty cascade. Drawn up on shore near the cabin was a raft of logs, a flatboat, and several canoes.

As Cloven-Hoof appeared upon the plateau, above the basin, a man left the group by the cabin-door, and advanced within speaking distance.

"What is this I hear about the desertion of the King of the Hills?" demanded the Demon Buffalo.

"Your majesty," replied the spokesman, "it is indeed true. The member of our gang you allude to cannot be found. One of our canoes is gone, and doubtless the traitor has long since escaped."

"When was he seen last?"

"Yesterday, your majesty—an hour before the company of chiefs arrived."

"Who towed the redskins' canoe up through the gorge?"

"Myself, your majesty!"

"How many were there of them?"

"Twelve, your majesty."

"Well, this is strange. You are sure that Warren is not in the valley?"

"Yes, your majesty. We missed him, but thought nothing of his absence, because we thought you might have him in the Vulture court. But when Aspero said, just now, that he was not there, we began to suspect that he had deserted."

"And what do you imagine is his object? Where has he gone?"

"I know not, your majesty, unless it be to the rangers' camp at the end of the Ghost Forest."

"Ha! yes. There he has probably gone. I did not think of it before. He doubtless intends to lead the Government dogs up here to capture us!"

"So I believe, your majesty."

"Well, then, by all the devils, I'll thwart his little game. I'll send the Ferret on his trail. If he could so successfully remove the loads from the rangers' rifles, right under their noses, without being detected, I'll wager he can put a bullet through this accursed traitor's heart. Where is he, Miguel—where is the Little Ferret?"

"In the ranch here, your majesty, drinking copiously."

"Then send him up here immediately."

Miguel turned toward the ranch, and when he had disappeared, Cloven-Hoof sat upon a rock near the edge of the plateau, and gave himself up to reflection. Not long, how-

ever, was he left alone, for soon there was a footstep, and Aspero came forth to the Demon's side.

"Ha! my worthy prime minister," said the creature, "we bid fair to overhaul this traitorous King of the Hills, yet I am about to send the Ferret after him!"

"What! the little Dutchman?"

"Yes, I believe him the shrewdest man in the valley to undertake the job. His success in unloading the rangers' rifles has fixed him strong in my confidence. He's an odd one, though! But here he comes."

A man had clambered up the ledges to the plateau, and stood close by, as if waiting for orders.

He was a stout, burly little German of some forty years, with a little bullet-shaped head, a round glossy face, and a form both corpulent and dwarfish.

"Ha!" said the Demon Buffalo, with his customary snort. "Is the Ferret ready to leave the Valley of Vultures, in pursuit of the King of the Hills?"

"Vat vor you wants me to do?" queried the Teuton.

"I want you to go immediately to the rangers' camp, where you were day before yesterday, and see if the missing man, Warren, is there, and if he is, you must shoot him down, without hesitation!"

"Dat is goot," nodded Little Ferret, approvingly. "I shudes him so quicker as vat nevar vas. Shall I sdarts right away off, all the vile?"

"Yes, go at once, and hurry back as soon as you dispatch your man!"

The man bowed, and then turned and clambered down into the valley. Ten minutes later he appeared on the river-shore, and shoved one of the canoes off into the stream.

Then he sprang in, and the two watchers on the cliff-plateau saw him drift rapidly to the north and soon disappear, like the seething waters, through the black aperture in the bottom of the wall of rock.

CHAPTER XV

THE JOURNEY TO THE APACHE VILLAGE

As soon as he was out of sight, Cloven-Hoof turned to Aspero, and said:

"You may go, minister, and see that those ruffians do not get too drunk, down there. We may need every man, soon, for if these rangers should learn our hiding-place, it would be easy work to surround us, with such directions as young Warren can

give them. How many hands have we now, Aspero, all told?"

"Seventy-six, your majesty, not counting the Indians and half-breeds."

Aspero bowed, and then left the plateau for the valley below.

As soon as he was gone, Cloven-Hoof re-entered the cavern, and ascended to the council-chamber. The moment his terrible head appeared above the top of the pulpit, Sky-Rocket, the Apache, came forward.

"The Demon Buffalo is great, and Sky-Rocket would like to tarry longer within his stone tents," said the chief, graciously. "But the wiser finger of his nature points toward his far-distant village, and bids him depart. He must go. Does the great Cloven-Hoof object?"

"Not at all," replied Cloven-Hoof. "Let Sky-Rocket wait here, and the Demon Buffalo will send two servants to guide him from the Vulture Valley, and accompany him on his journey."

Then the strange being was gone in a flash, as before, and a half-hour rolled by. At the expiration of this time, the prime minister, Aspero, appeared in the chamber, coming from the fissure. He was followed by a burly ruffian, whose features at once declared him to be a Swede.

"Are you ready?" demanded Aspero.

Sky-Rocket released Adams's feet, and then signified his readiness to depart.

Aspero re-entered the fissure, followed closely by the Swede. Sky-Rocket bade the girls to follow him, and Captain Chris to follow them, while he brought up the rear. Thus the party proceeded. The fissure had been hewn out by the hand of man, evidently, and led to the cavern below. In the course of ten minutes the whole party were in the basin, below the plateau.

Here Aspero and the Swede launched the flatboat, and the four prisoners, Sky-Rocket and themselves were loaded in. An extra man was also taken along to tow the boat back into the valley, as soon as its cargo was disembarked in the outer world.

At a given word the moorings were cut, and the barque with its human freight shot off with the rapid current toward the north.

Soon the aperture in the base of the mountain was reached, and the boat passed into a little tunnel, where the light of day never penetrated.

For perhaps a mile farther the subterranean voyage continued, and then the boat suddenly shot out into a large basin filled with water—a picturesque little lake, in a low valley fringed with trees.

Toward the northern shore Aspero and the Swede propelled the boat, and were soon

alongside a small plateau of rock, or natural wharf.

The whole party, save the man who was to work the boat back into the Vulture Valley, now disembarked, and Sky-Rocket went off in the motte of cottonwood for his horses, which he had left there a day before.

He soon returned with six wiry mustangs. The ladies were mounted. Captain Chris was now allowed the free use of his arms, but was compelled to ride with the girls, while Sky-Rocket and Aspero took the lead, and the Swede brought up the rear.

When all were mounted and everything was in readiness, the Apache gave the word and the cavalcade dashed off toward the north.

They soon left the timber and galloped out across a level stretch of prairie, and Captain Chris saw that they were on the western side of the water-course, about ten miles from the rangers' camp.

During the rapid ride, Captain Chris managed to keep up a conversation with the young ladies; but when the camp was pitched for night he was separated from their society.

Out of his saddle-bags, Sky-Rocket brought forth a plentiful supply of dried venison, and a hearty meal was made therefrom, by all.

As Aspero insisted on standing guard the fore part of the night, and the Swede the latter part, the chief was compelled to yield, though it was with bad grace.

The maidens were given blankets, and as the night was warm no other covering was needed, the soft grass serving the purpose of a bed.

Captain Chris was bound, hand and foot, and hauled near where the chief was to lay. Then, after Aspero was posted on duty, Sky-Rocket and the Swede flung themselves upon the green turf, and silence reigned in the camp.

The night passed without incident, and early in the following morning the cavalcade resumed the journey northward.

All day long they galloped on, and at nightfall again went into camp.

Aspero stood guard until midnight, when he was relieved by Sky-Rocket.

Soon after, the loud breathing of the outlaws proclaimed that they were sound asleep. Going to his saddle, the Apache chief took out two long lariats from the bags. These he dexterously fastened around the feet of both Aspero and the Swede, without awakening them. Then leading forth a spirited horse, he secured the other ends of the lariats to the animal's nigh hind leg near the haunch, and thrusting a cactus-

stalk under his tail, calmly awaited the result.

CHAPTER XVI

A PRISONER

At the rangers' camp, the rangers and the Navajoe Indians were anxiously waiting for the return of both Captain Chris and Jerrold, the artist.

Although the latter was nothing to them, they took an interest in his welfare, and were anxious to know whether or not he had won the wild race.

As to Captain Chris, there was not a heart that beat beneath the buckskin hunting-shirts of the sturdy whites, that did not beat truly for the gallant ranger chief. They all loved him as a brother and leader, and would have willingly fought till the last to shield him from death.

The Leopard, in fact, regarded him as a brother, and now, as another night began to cast its sombre shadows athwart the earth, he became uneasy.

Soon, however, two men were observed approaching the camp, mounted on horses. One was readily recognized as Jonathan Jeriah, the artist. Before him, across the neck of his scrawny horse, he bore the body of a man—the Mexican *alcalde*.

The second horseman was mounted upon a superb animal, but was unknown to the rangers.

The twain galloped leisurely along into camp, and Jerrold was greeted with rounds of applause.

"Gentlemen, allow me to introduce you to Colonel Alonzo Nesmit, of Zossei!" said Jerrold.

"What! ther feller as the capten hed the letter to?" asked Lije, excitedly.

"The same. He assisted me, in one sense of the word, in capturing this senseless villain here!"

"But the capten; whar's he?" demanded the rangers, eagerly.

"Captain Adams left my hacienda night before last," replied Nesmit, "with the intention of coming back to camp. He explained his haste by saying that he felt he should soon be needed here. This morning I concluded to ride over this way and see how you were getting along. On the trail, not far from Zossei, I discovered his dead horse. There were numerous footprints close at hand, which led me to believe that your leader has been surprised and captured."

"An' by whom?" queried Lije.

"The outlaws, doubtless. The tracks bore the impress of boots!"

A cry of horror escaped the rangers' lips.

"Cuss the luck; et's nuthin' more'n I expected!" growled Lije, "an' now, the devil'll be to pay."

While he was consulting with the men, who had gathered around him, Colonel Nesmit and Jerrold dismounted. The senseless *alcalde* was securely bound and left in the care of the former, while Jonathan once more mounted *La Belle* and struck off to the south, for the purpose of bringing his schooner into camp. He returned in the course of half an hour, and somewhat startled the camp with the declaration that he had seen a form skulking in the shadows of the dead pines, and also that his schooner had been plundered of its contents, even to the howitzer and photograph apparatus.

Grizzly Len and Alaska at once volunteered to scour the neighbourhood for the enemy, and they soon hurried off.

Darkness had now settled thickly over the earth, and as there were no prospects of having a moon until nine o'clock, Colonel Nesmit suggested that a fire be kindled.

"Nix!" said the Leopard, authoritatively, "nary er smidger. Ef thar's enny o' ther sneakin' 'Pash about they'll find us quick ernough, nevver ye feer wi'out our lightin' ther way fur 'em."

Old Jack, too, soon disappeared in the pall of gloom, and the rangers in camp waited patiently.

Stinging Wasp roused all his warriors and bade them make ready for a fight, and savage as they were, they needed no urging.

An hour passed, and the camp was wrapped in silence. All were waiting and listening.

Not a sound was to be heard save the low whistle of the rising wind through the Phantom Forest.

Lije glanced toward the east ever and anon uneasily. It was time the moon should arise; but through the thick shroud of black not the first heralding flush of its appearance was visible.

"What time is it, do ye jedge?" he inquired of Jerrold, who had crept to his side. "Past moonrisin' time, eh?"

By pressing the face of his watch close to his eyes, the artist declared it to be exactly nine o'clock.

"'Sh—!"

Both became silent as death.

There was a rustling in the grass directly ahead of them. What caused it?

Some one was creeping down upon them.

CHAPTER XVII

LITTLE FERRET

"'Sh—!" again cautioned the Leopard, as he laid his rifle to one side, and clutched the haft of his knife.

Nearer and nearer came the sound of rustling grass.

Then for a few moments all was quiet.

"Ye swerve ter ther rite," whispered Lije, placing his knife between his teeth, "an' I'll ante-lope off to ther left. Don' ye make even er squeak o' noise, an' we'll surround the varmint!"

Jerrold obeyed, and crept away with the stealth of a cat. A few moments later there rose high and loud on the night, the distinct sound of voices, in excited conversation.

"Ouch! ouch! Oh! Gott in heime!; vat vor you so mooch bull mine hair. I vas no Injing. Ouch! ouch! leds me go, I dole you, or I vill yell like dunder!"

"Whoop!" roared the stentorian voice of the Leopard; "so I've cotched ye, hev I; ye little kicker! I'll l'arn ye ter kim prowlin' eround our camp, I will! Boyees, ahe'd thar, strike er lite; I've got er Dutch redskin!"

Then followed a kicking and thrashing noise, intermingled with furious curses, as the Leopard dragged his victim back toward the camp.

The artist also turned his steps thitherward, eagerly.

A bit of *vesquas* or dry punk-wood was ignited, shaded by the rangers' caps, and held close to the prisoner's face.

The light thus afforded, enabled all to see that he was a white man—a burly, muscular little fellow, whose face at once proclaimed him a German.

"Who you war?" demanded Lije.

"Leedle Verret," was the sullen reply.

"Whar d'ye kim from?"

"Robper gamps."

"Hey! ye don't tell us! Wal, w'at war ye goin' ter do, jes' now?"

"See off Villip Varren vash in der gamp!"

"An' who's he?"

"He vas von mon ash deserted!"

"Ha! boyees, we've struck er big mine hyar. I say ye Dutch skunk, hes yer robber band got any prisoners?"

Little Ferret shook his head.

"Don' vas kno'," he replied.

"Will you show us where we can find these outlaws?" demanded Colonel Nesmit.

"Yaw! yaw! I shows you vare tey peesh, if you vas no gill me. I dakes you do der Fuldtchure Falley, an' helbs you vite

midt der robbers. I vash no like 'em. I gill 'em so quicker ash dunder ! ”

“ All k'rect ; we'll see 'bout thet, byme-by. In ther meentime,” said Lije, “ we shel hev ter tie ye up ! ”

Accordingly, the prisoner was securely bound, and left lying near the spot where Jerrold had deposited his captive, who, as yet, had not awakened.

About this time old Jack made his appearance from beyond the channel.

“ How's ther lay ? ” asked Lije.

“ Bad,” was the answer—“ buzzin' bad ! 'Pash t'other side, thicker'n frogs in er swamp. Creepin' up, eesy-loike. 'Pash up nor', in ther water-course ; 'Pash up nor', on this er' side on it ! ”

“ Thunderashun ! Is it possybul we're surrounded ? ”

“ 'Peers ter me thet way, purty much. Heerd from Grizzly Len and Alaska yit ? ”

“ No. Not er squeek.”

“ Reckon they'll be in soon, then, fer ther's a high old tornader brewin' ! ”

“ What is best to do ? ” asked Jerrold.

“ I'll tell ye *my* ijee,” replied Jack, as he listened for a moment to the rapidly-increasing volume of wind, which came whistling down from the northwest, and gave an uneasy glance around him. “ I opine we'd better scoot, jes' as fast as we can.”

“ Scoot ? ” echoed the others.

“ Perzactly ! Ha ! hyar kims ther b'yees, now. Let's see w'at they say.”

As he spoke, Grizzly Len and Alaska came hurrying into camp. They were quite out of breath, and not a little excited.

“ 'Pash ! ” gasped Alaska.

“ All around us, thicker'n hornets,” coincided Grizzly.

“ But how can we get out,” asked Colonel Nesmit, “ if we are surrounded ? ”

“ Hev ter make er rush fer et ! ” was the grim reply. “ We've got ter chews atween thet an' fightin' six hundred red niggurs. I say *git* ! ”

“ So do I ! ” joined in the body of the rangers. “ *Git's* ther word ! ”

“ Which way shell et be ? ” asked Len.

“ East, on course ! ” decided Lije.

“ Ranger *heap* wrong ! ” now put in Stinging Wasp, who had been a silent listener. “ Best go west—north. Ugh ! ”

“ Like thunder we will,” ejaculated the Leopard, sharply. “ D'ye s'pose we're goin' ter face er rip-roarin' tornader ? Not muchly, ef I kno' mysel' ! ”

“ Wagh ! Ingin kno' heap more dan pale-face 'bout big wind. Go south or east an' 'Pache light grass, an' fire chase you like debbil—run fast like white lightning—no git

out ob its path. Go north ; ride slow through tornado ; be all right ; wind blow dirt ober trail, and 'Pache no follow ; go west, de same ! ”

“ By ther Celestyel Singers, Injin, ye're er masheen-mannyfackterd brick, o' dubble-compresst axun ! ” cried Lije, seeing the wisdom in the chief's words. “ We'll foller yer directions. To hoss, all hands, an' we'll cross ter t'other side o' ther gully ! ”

As *La Belle* was yet harnessed to the “ schooner,” it was proposed that the two prisoners and Jack and Peggy should accompany the artist therein, while the remainder of the party, being well mounted, should lead the way. Everything was soon in readiness, and the strange caravan began to toil cautiously down into the channel and up to the banks on the opposite side.

Fully an hour was consumed in this operation, when a consultation was again held.

By this time the booming roar announced that the tornado was close at hand.

“ Now, I'll tell ye w'at I speculate,” said the Leopard. “ I'm a natteral-born wiggler, an' I propose thet I stretch my propensities out erkross thes prairer, hyar, an' see how cluss ther reds are, before I leed ye inter a bumble-bee's nest ! ”

“ Wagh ! yes,” assented the chief ; “ that is good. Den Leopard come back an' Stinging Wasp ride fast, down to the Apache, an' tell 'um dey wanted up north—dat pale-face escapin' dat way. Navajoe lead 'um good way off ; den slip away an' skedaddle back to pale-faces. He ! he ! Fool um *big* ! ”

“ But are you not afraid of being discovered ? ” asked Colonel Nesmit, anxiously.

“ Wagh ! no ! Navajoe dress much like 'Pache.”

“ Then,” said Lije, “ let's ter bizness. Hyar, Circus ; jes' hold my hoss, will ye ? ”

Pete took the rein of his mate's horse, and slipping flat upon the ground, the agile ranger crept away through the pall of blackness.

With anxious hearts the band awaited his return.

In fifteen minutes the Leopard came skurrying up.

“ 'Pash off thar—ha-lf m-m-ile ! ” he gasped, wiping the dirt from his eyes.

Like a meteor, Stinging Wasp shot away to perform *his* part.

An hour passed ; the tornado raged with fierce fury ; still the chief came not.

Hark ! A wild pandemonium of yells from afar—Apache yells ! Has Stinging Wasp been discovered ?

CHAPTER XVIII

FERRET'S STORY

No! not discovered; for at that moment a horseman dashed wildly up; he was the daring Navajoe chief.

"Ugh! come!" he cried, exultantly; "me fool um heap big. Dey mile off dar. We get through snare 'fore dey come back!"

He then wheeled his foaming horse toward the west, and led the way, followed closely by Lije, his rangers and the tribe—Jerrold bringing up the rear with his loaded schooner.

Like the tornado that rushed fiercely down upon them, the caravan dashed on, the yells of the betrayed savages sounding nearer and nearer.

Stinging Wasp held his way, silent and grim, and it was not till full three miles had been compassed that he drew rein.

"Wagh!" listening to the awful roaring and booming of the gale. "Much blow! Wind gettin' bigger! Ugh!"

"'Zactly!" responded the Leopard.

"Not stop soon," declared the chief, anxiously. "Blow all night. 'Pache close behind. Ugh! wait! Navajoe fix 'em!"

What was the ranger's surprise to see the redskin then quickly dismount.

"What now?" he demanded.

"Wagh!" responded Stinging Wasp, with a chuckle. "Ingin and Devil Snake after 'Pache. Dey no like *him*. Dey run, but he run faster. He cotch um. He tickle um legs, and make um dance the death-dance. Ugh!"

Quickly drawing one of his pistols the chief hurried to the rear of the caravan and discharged the weapon down into the grass. In a second a bright spiral column of flame flared up, which, on being fanned by the furious breath of the tornado, instantly developed itself into a sea of crackling, hissing, roaring fire, and was soon borne on southeastward, a gigantic sheet of awful flame.

"Whoop!" yelled Stinging Wasp, full of glee. "Rangers wait here. Navajoe be back soon. Ugh!"

And with another cry of triumph the savage dashed off in a direct northerly line.

Every few moments they could hear the report of his revolver: then would come leaping southeastward a giant ocean of rolling flame. In an hour fully two miles in width of furious fire was sweeping down across the prairies, toward the old water-course.

Shrieks from the tortured Apaches rose high above the boom of the tornado of fire.

The savages were truly caught in a trap. There was no use of trying to escape. The flames had burst like an infernal sea upon them.

On rushed the hurricane of destruction, like the red garments of a demon.

When he had set the fire as far as he cared to, Stinging Wasp returned to where he had left the caravan.

A roll-call was the next thing in order, and it was discovered that all the rangers, as well as the Navajoes, were present.

Then Stinging Wasp led the way on in a westerly course, while the cavalcade brought up the rear.

"Thunderashun!"

This exclamation was caused by the violent rearing of both the Leopard's and the chief's horses.

Hasty examination disclosed that the party had arrived on the banks of a small lake, into which our two friends had almost urged their animals.

"Wagh!" said Stinging Wasp, dismounting. "Camp here. Plenty grass and water. Timber yonder to right. No Ingins. Good place to camp. Ugh!"

So it was decided to stop there for the night—what remained of it.

In the morning Stinging Wasp declared it his intention to build his village on the site of the present camp, and he set his braves to work at manufacturing canoes for the lake and lodges for the prospective town.

After the morning meal Little Ferret was hauled out from the schooner into the presence of the rangers.

"Now," said the Leopard, "we're reddy fer yer assistance. Ye ken show us whar ther robbers' camp ar'!"

The Dutchman took in the surroundings at a glance.

"Dundter!" ejaculated he, as he saw the lake lying before him, "you vas gum der te righd sbot. Dis lage vas vere ve gum vrom der robbers' gamp!"

"Frum ther robbers' camp? 'Splain yerself. W'at d'ye mean?"

"You berseve dot exgavashun, ofer dar', eh?" queried Ferret, pointing to the black hole in the distant bank. "Vell, dot vas der blace vere vrom all dis vasser vas gum. Dere ish von undergroundt shannel vat runs vay pack ub hill indo der segrit falley. Ven der robbers vas vants der gum oudsider, dey gots demselves inder er poat vat ish vlat, and ridtes vite away town indo dis lage!"

"Indeed!" said Colonel Nesmit. "Then

is there no other way to penetrate the outlaws' quarters?"

"Yaw, dere vas von odder vay, but you vas no ged in dere. It pe inter der ghambers op der Gloven-Hoof!"

"Then, ye jedge ye kin ram us up through thet ar' passage, hey?" asked Lije, meditatively.

"Nix!" was the reply. "Off you lisdens, I dells you somedings vat you don' know; so help me! I vas peen von robper sinze der gang vas organized. Von veller goomes do me mit St. Louis, von day, und says he, 'Vell, my goodt vriendt, how you vas?' 'Burdy sny,' sbeags I, 'how vas yourself?' He tole me ash how he vas gooter as goodt, undt dells me ash how vas I vant de mage somedinks? I say 'Yaw,' ant he toles me vat if I aggompany him, he giffs me finfen-swanzy tollar a veek, do make dundter! I agrees, unt he prings me up yonter mit de moundings, ant I vind myself in one pig falley, locked in mit der beeks, vere dere peesh lots off men, in gaverns magin *risky*!"

"What!" exclaimed Colonel Nesmit, excitedly, "*whisky*?"

"Yaw. But lisdens vat I say. In von pig champer apove der vone vere dey mages der visky, vash vat dey gall a gourt-room. Here vash der gwarders off der Deemons Puffer, or der Gloven-Hoofs, ash de gall him. He has got von lod off vellers, mit glothes ofer mit deir headts, undt he mages der men vat manyfacitures der visky p'lieve ash he ish von Tuyfel, and dot dem vellers mid der glothes ofer mit der headts pe sbirridts vrom Burgadory. But dot vas noddinks more ash hoompug. I knows better ash dot. I von day dook von peek into der gourt-room, unt I see'd den vellers unt der Puffer dakes der dings mit der headts off, undt I see'dt dot dey vash noddinks more ash men, like any-poddies."

Here the Dutchman broke into a hearty laugh, in which the rangers joined him.

"How about the Phantom Cortege and the Demon Buffalo who gave us a visit the other night?" asked Jerrold.

"Dem vas Gloven-Hoofs unt his sbeerits," was the reply. "Dey vas dink dey sgare you, so much ash never vas. Put dey pe 'fraid mit your guns; so dey sendt me down mit your gamp, unt I wigglet oop unt dook der bullets out mit your guns, right unter mit dot drapber's nose."

And there the German gave Old Jack a comical glance of disdain.

"That settles who tampered with the weapons!" said Jerrold, calmly. "But, Dutchman, you intimate that these outlaws

are running an illicit distillery, in connection with their robbery raids, eh?"

"Yaw. Der robper pizness vas ontly von *plindt*."

"Sh—!" here interrupted the Leopard, grasping Ferret by the arm, excitedly. "Celestyal Singers! look! *the robbers, by thunder!*"

CHAPTER XIX

BLOOD AND VICTORY

He pointed across the lake toward the black apetrure in the opposite shore. A canoe had drifted therefrom out upon the surface of the lake.

Not a person was seen to occupy it, and yet it was suspected that there were outlaws concealed in the hold.

"Nix!" said the Dutchman, after surveying the little barque for a moment, "no robbers in dot poat. Id peesh der von dot I used ven I gum down mid der shannels. I leabs him hitched yoost inside der entrance mid der shannel, yeshterday afternoon, unt he vash gone unt proke away. I gatches him, off you vil pe so gind ash do gut dese here sdraps ash bind me!"

Ferret's limbs were at once freed, after which he swam out and pulled the canoe in to shore.

As he had said, it was unoccupied.

When the thread of the conversation was again resumed, Colonel Nesmit asked:

"Now, then, Dutchy, give us your views of how an attack can best be made upon these outlaws; do you advise a rush into the hidden valley at once?"

"Dundter, no!" was the reply.

"Indeed! Then what is to be done?"

"Listen unt I dells you. Do-morrow or nexgd day der robbers vill start von raft out vrom der falley loadted mit swanzy parrels off visky. It vill gum down mid dis lage, und you must be brebared to shood efry mon vat is on der raft, vich vill be vrom swanzy to foofsy. I vill now go pack mit der falley, so dot der robbers don' vas go und git susbicious. I vill get all off der vellers drunk mit drugt visky, so dot dey can no vite. Den ven you hafe shuded der robbers ont der raft, you gum up dhru mit der shannels, unt dundter you gills um all so quicgker as von minnit!"

"A good plan," said Jerrold. "You had better hurry up to the valley at once, as you have said, to prevent suspicion."

Arrangements were now made for the departure of Little Ferret, whom all the rangers felt they could trust.

He was restored his rifle and side-weapons,

which had been confiscated at the time of his capture, and in the course of an hour, he sprang into his canoe, paddled across the lake, and disappeared within the mouth of the remarkable channel.

At the camp, the rangers spent the day in lounging about, or assisting the Navajoes in the construction of their village, as they chose.

Jerrold and Colonel Nesmit kept a close watch over the still unconscious *alcalde*, and with the assistance of Peggy Bulard endeavoured to nurse him back to life and reason.

The next morning active preparations were made for the reception of the expected raft of outlaws, under the superintendence of the Leopard.

Stinging Wasp, with his seventy-five warriors, was concealed along the shore, on either side of the opening into the channel, and in such a position that they could pour in a destructive fire upon the enemy the instant they appeared.

Lije and his men held themselves aloof, in the background, but all were ready for a rush up the channel, when the right moment arrived.

Jerrold, Colonel Nesmit and a couple Navajoes had decided to remain at the camp, and take no part in the coming butchery. The former were anxious to be with their prisoner; the latter were left to protect the squaws.

Slowly the forenoon dragged by, but no outlaws came. Did they know of the trap that was waiting to spring upon them? Had Little Ferret warned them? Lije was asking himself these questions, when Alaska touched him on the arm.

"Listen!" he whispered.

The ranger instantly obeyed.

The notes of a loud boisterous song came floating out from the black depths within the mouth of the channel, growing more distinct each moment.

The raft was coming!

Nearer and more distinct came the strains of song, emanating from the coarse ruffians, who were approaching an unsuspected and sudden end of their journey.

Nearer—nearer, and then there was a shout, and the raft leaped from its subterranean course, and glided out upon the placid waters of the sunlit lake, with its freight of life, and distilled spirit of *hell*!

There were two score of them—all great brawny fellows, with bloated, evil faces, wild haggard eyes; and each man was in a standing position as the raft debouched into the little sheet of water.

The Navajoes needed no more.

Instantaneously the twang of bows resounded upon the air, and a perfect cloud of arrows swept down upon the outlaws.

Strange to say not an arrow failed to bury itself in the flesh of its victim.

Thirty of the ruffians fell dead in their tracks, while the remaining ten, all more or less wounded and disabled, attempted to plunge overboard and escape.

But it was a vain endeavour.

Like an army of avenging demons, the Navajoes sprang into their newly-made canoes, and gave chase. Without mercy the other ten were killed, and two score of reeking scalps hung at the victors' belts a few moments later.

Flushed at his great success, Stinging Wasp then was about to make a rush up the channel, when the Leopard checked him.

"Wait, Injin!" he said, wisely, "don' ye git too rampageous, now. Jes' wait an hour er so, an' gi' ther Dutchman er chance ter git ther rest o' ther gang chock-full o' essence, then we'll *all* go!"

The Navajoes acquiesced with ill grace, and the whole band waited an hour before entering the subterranean pass.

In the meantime the bodies of the dead outlaws were sent to the bottom of the lake, and the raft towed ashore in the vicinity of the Indian camp.

Some time was consumed in unloading the barrels; then Stinging Wasp led his warriors into the channel followed by Lije and the rangers.

At first a deal of trouble was experienced in braving the mass of wildly roaring waters, which tore furiously down the great tunnel.

For perhaps two hours the watery journey was continued, when suddenly from far ahead, came a faint gleam of bright light; they were nearing the entrance to the valley.

On pressed the Navajoes wildly, eagerly.

The opening into the valley was not twenty rods beyond, when a low "halloo" echoed through the water-course. It was instantly recognized as the salutation of Little Ferret, and he was commanded to advance.

"Dundter!" he gasped, as he came up. "I vas dink ash vat you nefer vas comin', you peesh so longt. I got dum robbers all so trunk ash puzzards."

"Good!" said Lije. "Now wull et be necessessary fur ter g'ard this pass?"

"Yaw! Robbers maype dry ter esgape mit dis shannel. Rangers sday here, unt let nopodys get py. Ingings go up mit der falley um gill um robbers. Ferret show 'em!"

A short consultation was held, and it was

decided to adopt the Teuton's plan, though Lije and his men were as eager as the Navajoes to take part in the coming affray.

Stinging Wasp, however, promised that Cloven-Hoof and his spirit jurors should be taken prisoners, and handed over to the rangers, at the termination of the battle.

When all this was satisfactorily arranged, Ferret went in among the savages, and they moved away.

With anxiety, and fear of the consequences, the rangers waited, and listened intently, each moment. Ere long the Navajoe war-whoops were heard and the reports of rapidly discharged weapons were faintly borne in through the long passage to the rangers' ears. Then came scarce audible yells, and death-shrieks; the battle had commenced!

An hour passed, and no sounds of further conflict were to be heard. The rangers grew chilled and impatient in their half-submerged position, and after waiting several minutes longer, they involuntarily moved forward, toward the valley.

Near the aperture-exit, they ran suddenly against Stinging Wasp, who was coming to meet them.

"Wagh!" said the chief, gladly. "Navajoe was comin' for rangers. Good! Foller Stinging Wasp! Ugh! his braves scalp all robbers. Capture Buffalo Devil and him white-robed dogs. Wagh! come!"

And he turned, and led the way into the Vulture Valley.

CHAPTER XX

RELEASED

WE must now return to Sky-Rocket's camp. When the chief stuck the prickly cactus stalk under the animal's tail, as a natural consequence, that tormented creature gave a snort of pain and terror, and sprang away. Then it became aware of the load attached to its leg, and growing still more frightened bounded off madly over the prairie, uttering savage screams and shrieks, of a character terrible to hear. On, and away tore the frenzied beast, dragging its freight of human lives, over rocks, into yawning *arroyos*, over ragged crags and through streams of muddy water—away! away! seemingly gone perfectly mad.

"What is it?" asked Captain Chris, as the cunning chief advanced to where the prisoners stood. "Those were the most frightful howls and screeches I ever listened to!"

A merry laugh burst from the Apache's lips.

"Wagh!" he said, drawing his knife and cutting the ranger's bonds; "the outlaws are kissing the prairie, like the morning dew. Danger gone. Pale-face and squaws free."

A glad cry escaped the lips of both the maidens and Captain Chris.

"Who are you?" demanded the ranger, grasping the chief's hand, and shaking it heartily. "You told me in the cavern that you were a friend, but I know not yet to whom I and these young ladies are indebted for our release!"

"Wagh!" was the reply, in a cold tone; "Sky-Rocket is a friend. Let that suffice till morning, when all will be explained. The pale-faces must now sleep, for we shall ride many miles on the morrow. Ugh!"

Without more ado the savage threw himself upon the ground and left the others to do the same, which they soon did, and in a few moments the camp was once more wrapt in silence.

All fell asleep except Sky-Rocket.

He was awake and watchful; and as soon as he was satisfied that the others slumbered, he cautiously arose and stole from the camp. On the prairie, half a mile distant, was a buffalo-wallow of water, and to this he made his way.

When he left the wallow and returned to the camp, all that was left of the Apache chief was the garb, for his face was as white as that of Captain Chris, the paint and stain having been removed by free applications of water.

He proceeded to kindle a small fire of dry weeds, and cook a few slices of dried venison over the flames; and by the time morning dawned, and Adams and the girls awoke, he had the breakfast all prepared.

Inez Murrillo was the first to awaken, and as she gazed around her, and her eyes fell upon the face of the man by the fire, she gave a wild, glad cry, sprang to her feet, and rushed toward him.

He arose with a pleased smile, and extended his open arms, into which she flung herself, eagerly.

"Inez! are you glad to see me?" he said, caressing her fondly.

"Oh, Philip! yes—of course I am."

"Did you know me, dear, in my Indian guise?"

"Indeed, no! You looked so different in the Apache dress and hideous paint, from what you did when you visited us in the grotto."

"Humph! I flatter myself I fooled Cloven-Hoof and his gang pretty nicely!" laughed the King of the Hills.

By this time Captain Chris and Nola and Guessie had awakened and were approaching—the two beautiful maidens leaning on the ranger chief's arm.

As the eyes of the captain rested upon the handsome face of Phil Warren, he uttered a cry of surprise, and drew back sternly.

"You here, man!" he exclaimed, his countenance growing white and red by turns. "What means this intrusion?"

Warren came forward fearlessly, and extending his hand, said:

"Sir, you have but to touch my hand, and I will explain—all, to your satisfaction, I doubt not."

Adams drew back, and refused the proffered treaty disdainfully.

"Back! villain!" he cried, bitterly. "I would as soon touch a serpent. You are a traitor—worse, a murderer!"

"Nay," replied the other, calmly, "*not* a murderer. Listen to me, Kit Adams, and you shall hear all."

"Thirteen years ago you organized a ranger band up in Montana out of the most reckless and daring spirits on the wild frontier. You led them into the midst of Indian warfare, and won for them and yourself a name that is never to be forgotten by the old settlers of that region. Among your band was a dashing young adventurer named Phil Warren, whom you loved as a brother, and who loved you in return, until the crisis came, when a coldness sprang up between you and me. That crisis was this: Boys, in fact, as we were, we both fell in love with an old trapper's daughter—sweet Eva Leigh. Yours was an infatuation of youth—mine was a passionate truth of adoration."

"Jacob Leigh, although a rough old trapper, had spent years in the gold mines, and had buried beneath his cabin an immense quantity of the precious metal; a fact which reached the ears of another member of your band, who had but recently joined it. This gold was the root of all evil."

"Eva loved me—you she respected. Her father hated me, for some reason I could never divine; while, on the contrary, he fairly worshipped you, and determined that Eva should become your wife."

"A coldness sprang up between us on Eva's account; that you treated me insultingly you cannot deny; that I returned fire for fire, I *will* not deny."

"Finally, you declared me no longer a member of your band, and bade me clear out. It stung me to madness. I was ready for anything; the devil was at hand to take advantage of my condition."

"His agent, Siaso Dreka, the new member, came to me and told me he had a band

of outlaws close by, and they were going to attack Leigh's cabin; if I would join, Eva should be mine. I jumped at the chance."

"The attack was made. I got Eva away in safety; the outlaws got the gold, and murdered Jacob Leigh. I fled with Eva down into Kansas, and there we were married."

"But the fates were against me. My little wife died, and I was left alone—a fugitive from justice; for you had set the hounds of the law upon my track, telling them I was the murderer of Jacob Leigh. Soon after this I met Siaso Dreka in Zossei. Here I found that he was not Dreka at all, but Alf Nesmit, the son of a leading citizen."

"He told me of an enormous project he had in view, and under penalty of being delivered up to justice as a murderer—for he had the evidence all against me—I was compelled to promise to join his future band—ay, to swear it, as I hoped to be saved from the fiery pit of hell."

"I was then permitted to go free, till the project was in working order, but I was conscious of being constantly watched by the spies of my evil genius."

"I roamed around for years, and at last I entered the service of *Alcalde* Murrillo, as a confidential servant, and I learned many secrets of his black life—one of which relates to Miss Bulard, here—and in the bargain fell desperately in love with Inez, who is here beside me, my promised bride."

"When the Vulture band was thoroughly organized, I was captured, taken to their retreat, and again forced to swear an oath—a horrible oath, of ten years' servitude in the interests of the order. Fortunately, I did the terrible commander a valuable service a short time ago, and he declared my sworn ten years of servitude should expire two months hence."

"After the attack was made on Los Des Pumas, and Inez and Nola were brought to our retreat, I resolved to escape, and take them and Miss Bulard with me."

"You know nearly all the rest. Cloven-Hoof had sent couriers from the valley to the Indians, offering for sale the maidens, and requesting a visit. I knew of this; I slipped from the valley, waylaid an Apache chief, donned his garb, bought you away from the Arapahoes, and now I've set you free."

"I am done, sir. You have listened to the truth, and nothing but the truth. Here are my pistols, Kit. I am a traitor, as you say, but not a murderer. Shoot me, if you like; I'll offer no resistance."

Captain Chris sprang forward—sprang forward not to touch the extended weapons,

but to clasp the other hand of his former mate, and shake it heartily.

"I believe you, Phil, old boy; I believe you!" he said, huskily, the tears standing in his eyes. "We were both wrong, then, Phil; I for treating you like a dog; you for betraying your trust, and putting the stain of suspected crime upon your name. We were both wrong!"

The next instant the two men were locked in each other's embrace, and they wept tears of joy and gratitude.

CHAPTER XXI

STRANGE DISCLOSURES

IN the little mountain-locked valley, the rangers beheld a strange and startling sight.

Bodies of slain and scalped outlaws were strewn about over the level, and the earth was literally soaked with human blood. Here and there lay a Navajoe warrior, where he had fallen, at the hands of the enemy.

Then followed a thorough inspection of the outlaws' stronghold.

It was found that there were numerous caverns and chambers in the soft limestone mountain-sides, besides the council room and the apartment beneath it, all of which were in most constant use by the illicit distillers. Their capacity for producing illegal whisky was found to be something immense.

Large quantities of the requisite machinery and apparatus for manufacturing the liquor were found, and it was discovered that a perfectly-working distillery had been running for months in the hills, while the country was being excited to a high pitch of superstition over the doings of Cloven-Hoof and his Vultures, who, when questioned, acknowledged that their raids throughout the settlements were merely *blinds*, to keep the settlers from divining the real intentions and operations of the brotherhood.

Several thousand dollars were unearthed from the floor of the court-chamber at the suggestion of Little Ferret, and when the rangers had ascertained all that remained to be known, it was proposed to return to the camp on the lake-shore.

As the Dutchman understood managing the flatboat, the prisoners were loaded in it and started off down the channel under a strong guard of Navajoes, while Stinging Wasp and the rest of his band, together with Lije and the rangers, brought up the rear.

Camp was reached in due time, and

Colonel Nesmit and Jerrold were apprised of the raid into the Vulture stronghold and of the discoveries made there.

The former was considerably interested, as he was in the service of the Government, and noted down all facts deemed worthy of notice in a report he intended to submit to the higher authorities.

As it was growing dark, it was resolved that nothing should be done with the captives until the following day, when they would be duly tried and treated to the full code of border justice.

They were consequently placed under a strict guard of Navajoe braves, and preparations for the night were made.

The night passed away, and in the morning arrangements were made for the trial of the captives.

But, before the hour arrived for said trial, considerable excitement was created by the awakening of the *alcalde*, Conales Murrillo, who clamorously demanded that all the camp should assemble around his death-couch, as he had a confession to make, to which he wanted all to bear witness.

This request was of course obeyed, and the rangers and Indians alike drew respectfully near.

The *alcalde* appeared to be in full possession of his mind and senses, and when the crowd had assembled close by he turned to the artist, Jerrold, who was kneeling by his side.

"Arthur Trevor," he spoke in husky tones, while the tears came to his eyes, "I am dying—dying, and with my soul burdened with crime. I know not how I will be received in the next world; I dare not think of it. For hours I have been conscious, though it was unknown to you, during which time the good and bad of my nature have been each struggling for the mastery. Thank the Lord, the good has triumphed, and I shall make to you disclosures of my past life, cost what it may.

"Listen to me, Arthur Trevor, and you, Colonel Nesmit; listen, and remember each word that interests you; for my moments on earth are numbered, and I shall speak direct to the point.

"I will go back, Arthur Trevor, to those long ago days, when we were young college chums at Harvard.

"I will commence with the time when we both loved a beautiful belle of our set—an accomplished, pure-hearted and winning maiden, whom all loved—whom we worshipped.

"She was a prize, was Aileen Le Clercq, and you won her—won her fairly, I afterward found, but at the time I was mad over

my defeat, and believed you to be guilty of all imaginable crimes; cursed you and her; cursed my own friends and my God, all alike, in my insane fury.

"Then and there I began to wade deeply into crime and wickedness.

"I was only in moderate circumstances, and, very naturally, I longed for riches. Had I been a millionaire-prospective, like yourself, Arthur Trevor, I, instead of you, would have won the hand of Aileen Le Clercq in marriage.

"As it was, I was a beggar; you won her, and I swore I'd have revenge. You married her, and two lovely little twin children were born you—a boy and a girl. Oh! how proud you were of these tiny darlings! But, you were destined to lose them—to lose all you held dear to you, and that, too, through my wickedness.

"At the time I arrived at this determination, I was stopping at a small squatters' settlement on the Missouri river. One black and stormy night, I quitted the place, and rode southward in search of some spot where I could drop the twins and rid myself forever of them, and at the same time put them forever beyond your reach.

"I found a suitable hiding-place after hours of riding—a lonely old swamp on the river-bottom, near which stood a deserted cabin. I tied rocks to the clothing of the male child, and drowned it in a pool of still, clear water. The piercing shrieks of the little thing are yet ringing in my ears. I grew nervous, hurled the other child into the water, and fled; heartily glad that the job was done with. I came immediately to Texas, and wedded a Mexican woman of wealth.

"She was the daughter of an old Spanish *alcalde*, and it proved a fortunate match for me. Two children were born us; one a dark-eyed little girl, the image of its mother; the other a genuine counterpart of the old Spanish don. I hated the young imp from the moment my eyes rested upon it, and resolved rather than to rear it with such a feeling, to dispose of it.

"One day, I sent you a telegram from a distant town, purporting to come from a relative of yours, and requesting your presence immediately, as your cousin was dying. You flew off on your mission. I was at hand, and of course called upon your wife. She at first received me cordially, but when I proposed that she should fly with me, to some distant land, she treated me as a vile thing to be spurned from her path.

"I grew enraged; and in a moment of terrible fury, I killed her—ay, killed her,

Arthur Trevor, and when you returned from your wild-goose chase, you found your loving wife a corpse, and your twin babes gone!

"I fled; you pursued. I roamed from point to point; you, like an avenging Nemesis, followed in my wake. At last you approached so near, upon my trail, and the babes were such an incumbrance, that I resolved to rid myself of them, and thereby facilitate my chances of escaping your vengeance.

"The chances soon came.

"Having nothing except my wife to attract me to Los Des Pumas, I travelled about the country for a time, and during said time, I met with you, Alonzo Nesmit.

"We went into a speculation and made a deal of money, all of which I finally decamped with—also taking with me your little fair-haired daughter, Inez. In return, I sent you my hated son with my best respects. Whether you sought me or not, I do not care to know. Enough it is to say you would probably never have found me, had it not been for the wild race of three days ago."

"And my children?" eagerly questioned Arthur Trevor, bending forward.

"And my daughter?" echoed Colonel Nesmit, anxiously.

A sickly smile lit up the visage of Conales Murrillo.

"Your daughter, Nesmit," he replied, "is living, and was borne off a prisoner by the Vultures at the time of the attack on Los Des Pumas, together with my own daughter, Nola. If you find them, will you care for her as I have kindly cared for *your* child?"

"I will," replied the colonel, tears filling his eyes. "If God allows me to find them, I will treat your child as my own!"

"May Heaven bless you!" sighed Murrillo.

"But, what of my children?" cried the artist, impatiently; "you have not told me of them!"

"True! I have not, because I would spare you more pain," was the reply. "They are both dead!"

Arthur Trevor drew a long sheath-knife from in under his clothing, a determined fire gleaming in his eyes.

"Then you shall die, as did my poor, beautiful wife and children," he exclaimed, fiercely.

"Hold! hold, thar!" shouted old Jack Bulard, excitedly; "don't kill him yit! Jes' hold on er bit till I explatterate!"

Then, with his wife on his arm, he drew near, and in his rough, homely manner of

speech, related the occurrence of seventeen years before; all about the finding of the babes in the swamp; how the female had been reared by them to womanhood; how they had found a singular birthmark on the dead infant, and the magnificent locket on the little girl.

Arthur Trevor put up his knife.

"And this female child is living?" he demanded, joyfully.

"Ay!" cried a voice, back of the crowd, where a little party of horsemen and women had all the while been attentive listeners—"and here she is—here are all of us!"

Then, when Captain Chris and Guessie, Phil Warren and Inez, and Nola rode out into the scene, the surprises were complete.

The rangers sprang to greet their captain; Mr. Trevor received his long-lost daughter with open arms, and Colonel Nesmit caught pretty Inez to his breast, while Nora Murrillo tearfully knelt beside the dying *alcalde*, who she had never known really was her father, he having given her and Inez to understand that he was simply their guardian, or foster-father.

Long and rapturous were the greetings, and well they might be, for even in the presence of death, all the whites assembled on the shores of that lone little lake felt in their hearts the true gratitude and joy of a happy reunion.

When quiet was restored, and the thoughts of the rangers once more reverted to their prisoners, the startling discovery was made that *they had made their escape*, the Navajoe guards having thoughtlessly left them alone, at the time the camp had been summoned to the death-scene of the repentant dying *alcalde*.

Near where they had stood, lying upon the ground, was the explanation of the mystery of the Demon Buffalo, or Cloven-Hoof.

It was a buffalo's head, dextrously hollowed out, so as to fit down over the head of an ordinary person, a long, thick and sweeping mane of hair serving to conceal the connection at the neck. By the side of this lay a pair of spangled pants, and a pair of shoes, the latter being manufactured out of painted leather, and closely resembling the hoofs of a buffalo, being cloven, and fringed with hair.

So much for the ingenuity of a bad man for a bad purpose.

Instantly the alarm was spread, and a *posse* of mounted rangers headed by Captain Chris, the Leopard, and Colonel Nesmit started in pursuit. The trail was soon found, and in a few moments the cavalcade came upon a man lying face downward in the grass. He was recognized by Colonel Nesmit as Alf, the son of *Alcalde* Murrillo, and by Adams, as the counterpart of the portrait in the Nesmit hacienda.

He was almost dead, having fallen in his attempt to escape, and run a lance he had stolen through his body.

He revealed enough, however, to satisfy the rangers that it would be useless to pursue his companions, as they had scattered—never again to unite. Before he expired, he confessed that for years he had been associated with a band of the sharpest rogues he could find in Eastern cities, and that it was he who had personated the Cloven-Hoof, which had created such a sensation all along the border.

Alcalde Murrillo and his sinning son were both buried in one grave, on the banks of that picturesque little Texan lake.

The whole of the distilling apparatus used by the Vultures was destroyed, and Stinging Wasp moved into the little mountain-locked valley, where he still lives with his tribe, a peaceful and respected chief.

A week after the strange reunion on the lake-shore, a merry little party set out across the plains towards the East.

They were a jolly company, and prominent among them, we might mention the Leopard and his rangers, Captain Chris Adams, and Miss Bulard, or Trevor, as she is now called, Philip Warren and Miss Nesmit, Mr. and Mrs. Jack Bulard, and two very happy gentlemen, named, respectively, Nesmit and Trevor—formerly the eccentric Jonathan Jeriah Jerrold, artist.

Also, in their midst rode the sturdy little German, Little Ferret.

The journey was made without incident worthy of mention, and at last the party brought up in Austin.

Captain Chris and his affianced were wedded in due course, and the command of the "Invincibles" was given to Lije, the Leopard.

THE END

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